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# WESTERN ACTION

132 PAGES

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## GUN-WOLVES' WAGES

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NOVEL

by
CHUCK MARTIN

## WINNING HAND

by Ben Frank

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# ARE THESE MISTAKES HOLDING YOU BACK?

***If you're not getting ahead as fast as you'd like, check these possible reasons. Find out why you're not a success and what you can do about it.***

YES NO

☐ ☐ **Do you put things off?** To get anywhere you have to make a start.

☐ ☐ **Do you really want to succeed?** Isn't there something you want enough to work for it? Marriage, a new home, money for your family—all depend on your advancement.

☐ ☐ **Are you unwilling to give up temporary pleasures?** Some people think more of a good time now than of promotion and higher pay later on.

☐ ☐ **Are you too lazy to plan ahead?** You've got to manage your life, plan for success and stick to it.

☐ ☐ **Are you afraid of responsibility?** In a bigger job you'll have to make decisions, act, *be* somebody.

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# WESTERN ACTION

Volume 16 February, 1953 Number 5

## Complete New Book - Length Novel

### GUN-WOLVES' WAGES

by Chuck Martin ..... 10

Greed rode the range, when the map of an oldtime Spanish treasure was discovered, and Gospel Cummings and his friends found themselves up to their ears in gunsmoke. But the wages of sin were Boothill!


## Short Stories and Features


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"Just because life's a gamble is no reason for playing like a fool!"

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"If this character's really the Tucson Kid, then he's changed — badly!"


**Next issue on sale February 1st**

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*

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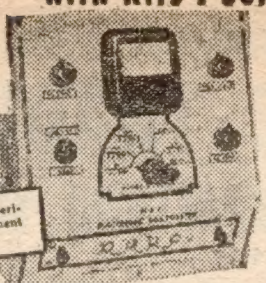

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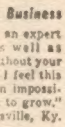

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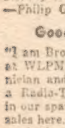

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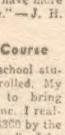

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# THE TRADING POST

## A DEPARTMENT of TRUE STORIES

# The Taming of A Western Bully

## by Harold Gluck

THE WESTERN bully was a definite nuisance to the good settlers, ranchers, and townspeople. He would push nice people around, and each success inflamed his ego. When he was full of liquor, there was always the temptation to shoot up the town. The ways of handling him were strictly limited.

First, there was the possibility that an aroused group might form a neck-tie party, this happened to Jack Slade. When sober, Slade was an efficient division manager of the Overland Stage. He could tame badmen with either his fists or revolver. But when drunk, Jack was a holy terror. The mining folks out in Virginia City, Montana, finally decided they had enough of him, and Vigilantes hanged Jack. That definitely put an end to his activities.

Second, there was a chance that some law-abiding citizen might chal-

[*Turn To Page* 8]

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lenge the bully to a duel. This could only take place where legal law enforcement officers were either not present or were relatively weak. Captain Shunan was a western bully, who made life miserable for the trappers. He would pick on a weak man and flatten him to a pulp with his fists. During one of the trappers' rendezvous, Shunan became exceedingly offensive. In language which his biographer dressed up, Kit Carson said, "Shunan, before you stands the humblest specimen of an American in this band of trappers, among whom there are, to my certain knowledge, men who could easily chastise you; but being peaceably disposed, they keep aloof from you. At any rate, I assume the responsibility of ordering you to cease your threats, or I will be under the necessity of killing you."

A duel took place, Shunan armed with a rifle against Kit Carson armed with a single-barrel dragoon pistol. Net results? Shunan was badly wounded, his reputation as a bully smashed, and the trappers could breathe easily again.

Third, the western bully might come up against a real tough hombre—the badman who wasn't afraid of anything that could walk. Then an "X" marked the spot where the bully was last seen. This happened to one Joe Grant—who in January, 1880, came to Fort Summer. Sober or drunk, he was bad medicine. This time he was up against a real tough man—Billy-the-Kid.

Billy merely outsmarted Joe Grant. In a saloon, Billy got the chance to combine brains with cold-blooded murder He was going to take a bullet out of Grant's revolver. He managed to get his hands on the gun and saw there were some fired cartridges in the barrel. He merely twisted it around in order that the firing-pin hit an empty shell. Then when Grant wanted to pick an argument, Billy let him go ahead. Grant fired first—on the empty shell; next step was for someone to pick up the corpse, and there was one bully less.

Fourth, if you had a killer as the law-enforcement authority, that simplified matters. Bill Mulvey hit Hays City from St. Joseph. With liquor inside of him, and a revolver in each hand, Bill Mulvey looked like a typical bully. Fortunately, Wild Bill Hickok happened to be the city marshal at the time. There was a warning to be good—which was totally neglected. When the smoke cleared up, the West had been relieved of another bully and the good citizens of Hays City gave Wild Bill Hickok a vote of thanks for the way in which he handled the situation.

Fifth, the law could sometimes catch up with the western bully and put him behind prison bars. There he would remain while his reputation gently faded away; also, his time-reactions in going for his gun slowed up. That happened to John Wesley Hardin. He was a terrible bully who got his way because he could back it up with deadly gunfire from his sixshooter. But the man who entered prison and left it was not the same Hardin; it was merely a matter of time in regard to "who" would finish Hardin. John Selman did the job, though he didn't last very long.

MODERN psychologists tell you that the best way to finish off a bully, and also to redeem him, is to make him absolutely ridiculous. A bully detests nothing so much as having people laugh at him. Now, while this might sound simple, you are entitled to ask the million dollar question: How does one arrange such a situation? Alas, it can't be arranged; it must happen. And this is the story of how it happened to one western bully.

The time is in the early 1860's, and the locale is an Overland coach station. The particular bully is known as Arkansas. He carries two revolvers in his belt and there is a bowie-knife projecting from his hip. He is usually, drunk and itching for a fight.

Arkansas' particular target for the evening is the landlord, Johnson, a

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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Ace Fleming faced the threatening crowd, backed up by his seasoned companions. ...St. John lay motionless on the floor.

# Gun-Wolves' Wages

## Feature "Gospel Cummings" Novel

**A land-grant from the Spanish crown, a fabulous treasure in bullion and jewels, a woman wanted by two men, and two rival outlaw-gangs seeking both the land and the treasure — Gospel Cummings read the signs and knew that the wages of sin would be boothill!**

**By Chuck Martin**

A STUTTERING pair of shots blasted the twilight quiet of Three Points, which stood at the entrance to Hell's Half Acre. Gospel Cummings raised his head to listen, then arose from his chair in the tight little cabin he had built. As the Caretaker of Boothill, he was handy to his work.

"Two fellers shooting, and one shot second," the bearded plainsman murmured knowingly. "It could have been a draw, but those Strip outlaws are fairly accurate with their hardware."

An old Bible was open on the deal table, and on the floor under the table stood a quart of Three Daisies Whiskey. Gospel Cummings was a man with a dual personality; strong drink was his besetting sin, admittedly.

Now he stood in the open doorway, six-feet and a bit. His age might have have been anywhere from forty to fifty—the silky brown beard was deceptive. A black-butted sixshooter rode in a low-slung holster on his sturdy right leg; it was the right side where the bad man of his nature had its abode. The Book was always carried in the left tail of his long black coat, on the side where the good man lived.

Cummings put on his black Stetson and left the cabin. He walked slowly between the rocky pillars

which marked the entrance to Hell's Half Acre, and his step was reverent. Long rows of headstones, made from volcanic rock, marked the final resting-places of those who had died with their boots on. Some of the stones were chiseled with names and dates. The services for most of the departed had been read by Gospel Cummings...for a slight fee.

The quiet of a dying sun hovered over the place of the dead; a horseman was disappearing over a ridge leading to the mesas toward the west; a faded gray Stetson rested on an unmarked headstone at the end of a long row. Cummings made his way unerringly to the discarded headgear.

The body of a man was lying beside the headstone; he was staring at the red sky with sightless eyes. Only dead men keep their eyes open after a gun-powder showdown.

"Yeah; he shot second," Cummings murmured in his beard. He leaned forward for a closer scrutiny. "Pete Lagrue," he identified the corpse. "He was *segundo* to Cord Demingway."

Gospel Cummings glanced at the discarded hat. Two gold pieces were lying on the brim—double the usual fee for reading a service for the departed. Cummings took the twenty dollars and slipped the coins in a vest pocket.

"The way of the transgressor is hard," he murmured; "and the wages of sin is death. I'll notify Boothill Crandall, and John Saint John!"

He placed the hat on the dead man's face, removed his own, and left the graveyard. His funds had been low; he could now replenish his stores while in town on official business.

Cummings saddled his old hip-shot sorrel and headed for Vaca-town. He was tall in the saddle, completely relaxed, a man of simple tastes. Darkness had fallen when he rode up the wide, dusty street of the little cattle-town. A light showed from the office of the adobe jail—which meant that the deputy sheriff was at home. Cummings reined in at the rail and dismounted.

"Come in, Gospel," a deep voice invited. "The mesa outlaws are on the loose again, and I might need some help."

CUMMINGS stepped into the office and nodded at an incredibly tall man, who wore the badge of a deputy sheriff. John Saint John was six-feet-six, and weighed two hundred and forty pounds of hard bone and rawhide muscle. "You eat yet?" he asked.

Gospel Cummings shook his head. "I'll eat after I make my report," he answered. "Pete Lagrue was killed back in Hell's Half Acre, just about late sundown; I left him lay for the law and the Coroner."

"That murdering owlhooter had a killing coming long since," the deputy declared approvingly. "Who committed this law-abiding crime?"

"Couldn't say," Cummings replied. "He was *segundo* to the ramrod of that outlaw-gang, Cord Demingway. It could have been some of Cord's work, because Pete was unusually fast with his tools."

"But Demingway was faster," Saint John answered. "Let's go up to Char-

"Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust," intoned Cummings sadly.

ley's and put on the feedbag. This is on the law; you can ride back with me and point out the position of the corpse."

They left Cummings' horse at the rail, and walked up the street to a small lunch-room. Both ordered steaks well-done, with the fixings. These two had been friends for fifteen years, each independent in his own individu-

al manner. Cummings had helped the law as many times as he had refused; the times he had refused had been due to the deputy's domineering manner.

"We ain't had a planting in Boothill in a month," Saint John remarked, over the pie and coffee. "Did they pay your fee?"

Gospel Cummings showed his annoyance. "In advance," he admitted reluctantly. "I'll get a few provisions before we ride back to Three Points."

"Fat Farrel, up at the *Casino*, says to tell you your credit is still good," Saint John remarked carelessly. "A man never knows when he might come down with a wracking cough."

"Or get bit by a snake," Cummings added grimly. "I'll pick up my merchandise and meet you at the jail; like as not you will want to notify the Coroner."

"Don't tell me how to do my law-routine," the big man growled. "Your hands are shaking."

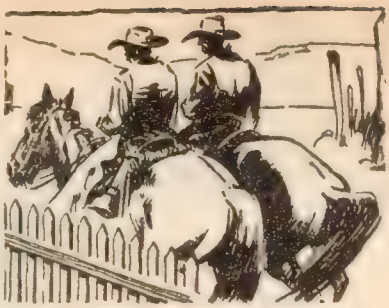
Gospel Cummings glared and rose to his feet. He left the lunch-room, walked up to the *Casino*, entered the rear door, and coughed suggestively. He jerked when something touched his arm in the dark, but a smooth voice spoke quietly. "Kill this one a customer paid for and left," the bartender suggested. "It's your own brand... Three Daisies!"

"I take that kindly, Fat," Cummings murmured gratefully; "wrap me up four quarts, in a late newspaper."

He took the whiskey-bottle, made sure that Farrel had gone back to his bar, and bent his elbow. He drank deeply in the dark, followed with a chaser of the same, and sighed with satisfaction. Now the tremble had left him, and he wiped his silky brown beard with his left hand.

"Wine is a mocker," he murmured; "I never did care much about wine."

Fat Farrel came back with a package wrapped in newspaper. "Three dollars, at six-bits a quart," he said



quietly. "If you are short, I'll put it on the cuff."

"Take it out of this," Gospel answered, and gave Farrel a ten-dollar gold piece.

The bardog took the coin, tested it with his teeth, and asked a question. "Who got rubbed out?"

"Pete Lagrue; Saint John is riding back with me to bring in the body. Looks like either Pete, or the gunnie who beat him to the shot, picked out Pete's grave."

"Life is like that there at times, Gospel," Farrel said thoughtfully. "The Saint rides out and brings the corpse in, draped face-down over a saddle; Boothill Crandall prepares the body for decent internment, and hauls it right back to the place where he made the pick-up."

"It is a vicious circle," Cummings admitted. "But that's what the Book says: He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword."

"I reckon that applies to sixshooters," Farrel admitted. "I better tell the boss. He's had some trouble on the Circle F with that outlaw-gang; they've been rustling his beef for camp-meat. Not that Ace objects much to a man eating—but these cow-thieves kill a critter and just take the choice cuts; they leave the rest for the coyotes, and other varmints."

"Take care of yourself, friend," Cummings said by way of farewell.

"You do the same, Gospel," Farrel said earnestly; "down there by the graveyard at Three Points, in your cabin, you are more or less a sitting duck."

"No man lives forever," the gaunt

plainsman remarked carelessly, and he stepped into the alley and made his way to the jail.

HE WONDERED about Ace Fleming who owned the *Casino,* and also the Circle F cattle-ranch. Fleming was a square gambler; one of the smallest men in the district; and also one of the strongest. He stood five-feet-four in his high-heeled boots, was incredibly fast and accurate with a sixshooter, and did not know the meaning of fear.

As Cummings rounded the alley corner, the gambler spoke softly from the shadows. "Did you find the late Pete Lagrue?"

"Howdy, Ace; I found him in the graveyard."

"I killed him on Circle F range," Fleming said wonderingly.

"Thou shalt not kill, friend," Gospel admonished. "I saw a horsebacker riding away from Hell's Half Acre, and it wasn't you."

"I caught him killing a Circle F beef," Fleming explained. "There were two of them; one got away."

"So he piled the deceased on his horse and lugged him down to the burying-ground," Cummings said. "Funny about that; I heard two shots, close together."

"That was just to bring you on the run," Fleming surmised. "What I wanted to say was this. I always bury my dead; here's a hundred dollars for Boothill Crandall, the undertaker. I'd rather not appear in the matter; you'll do this for me?"

"Count it done, Ace," Cummings agreed. "How is Sandra?"

"She gets lovelier every day," the little gambler answered quietly. "I'll always be in your debt for introducing us. You raised her from childhood, and we've been married three years."

"I might have been her father," Cummings answered with a sigh; "but I could not control my appetite for strong drink."

"No man here has ever seen you under the influence," Fleming replied; "I wish my sins and shortcomings were as few as yours."

A black-covered wagon left the alley across the street, pulled by two black horses, with a tall thin man on the driver's seat. This would be Boothill Crandall, who operated the furniture-store, and did the local undertaking as a sideline. He also chiseled appropriate epitaphs on the volcanic headstones for a dollar a letter.

Cummings joined Saint John and spoke briefly. "Making it easy on yourself, eh Saint? I saw Boothill driving toward Three Points."

"That's his business," the deputy answered grimly. "He gets forty dollars for a County case, and digs the grave."

Cummings mounted his horse with his package under his left arm. Saint John had saddled a big gray, and the two men left town and turned toward the west. They overtook and passed the undertaker and his wagon, but waited at the entrance to the graveyard until Crandall came along at a walk.

"I don't cater to these charity cases," Crandall complained; "costs me three dollars to have the grave dug."

"Give him a good coffin," Cummings said slowly. "Here's a hundred dollars a friend asked me to pass along to you."

"Who was this friend?" Saint John asked, suspiciously.

"I promised to keep his identity in confidence," Gospel replied.

"You can't withhold evidence from the law!" the deputy bellowed. "I demand to know who paid for this burying!"

Gospel Cummings sighed. "You never learn, lawdog," he said patiently. "Now you just keep on demanding until Doomsday, and see what it buys you; come on, Crandall," and he led the way to the dead man.

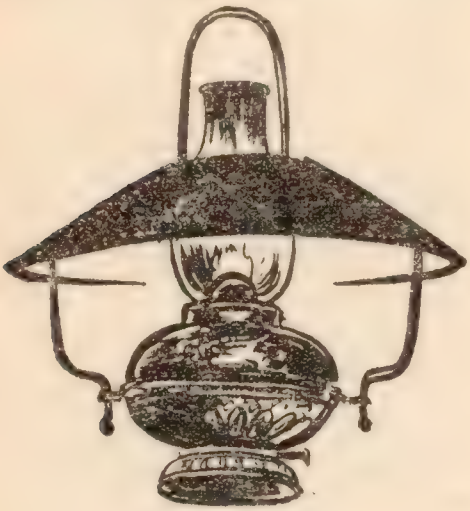
THERE WAS just enough light left for Crandall to tool his team between the headstones. Cummings helped him lift the late outlaw into the wagon, and Saint John dismounted and came up to make his official examination.

"I know this corpus delicti," he said grimly. "Name of Pete Lagrue, and he had seven notches whittled on the handles of his killer-gun. Shot right through the heart, so he didn't suffer none to speak of."

"Which it didn't give him time to make his peace with his Maker," Cummings said, sadly.

"One of two gun-hawks did that killing," the deputy guessed shrewdly. "Cord Demingway or Ace Fleming could beat him to the shot, and shoot where they was looking." He stared at Cummings as Crandall drove out of the burying ground. "Which one was it?" he demanded.

"Ask them both," Cummings answered quietly. "You can always find Ace."



"Meaning I can't catch Demingway?" the deputy asked sharply.

"Up to now you haven't," Cummings reminded. "That outlaw-crowd has been back on the mesas going on two years. Well?"

"Well what?"

"What are you going to do about it?" Cummings asked.

"Let's get back to your cabin and sample that merchandise you bought," Saint John suggested.

"Look, Saint," Gospel demurred. "Whiskey is six bits a quart. You get well paid in your job; there's no law against you buying some of your own."

"It would look bad, and me being the law," the deputy explained.

"Why not break off the habit?" Cummings asked.

"I might ask you the same question."

Gospel Cummings sighed. "I've already told you the answer," he replied sadly; "let's get back to my humble abode."

They rode back to the cabin, and Cummings off-saddled and stabled his horse. Saint John tied up at the rack; waited while the gaunt plainsman struck a match and lighted the coal-oil lamp. He followed Cummings in and glanced at a paper on the table. Cummings was reading it slowly.

"Don't touch that paper," the deputy ordered, sternly; "I might attach it for evidence."

"So do it through the due processes of the law," Cummings answered acidly. "It is just an order from Cord Demingway to bury his old pard, and he left a hundred dollars to pay for it."

"So it was Fleming who did for Pete," the deputy said softly. "I better have a talk with that gambler; I don't stand for anyone taking the law into their own hands!"

"That's between you and Ace," Cummings said. "But if I was you I'd be diplomatic about it. Ace can out-shoot and out-fight you, and we both know it."

"I don't know any such a damn thing!" Saint John shouted.

"Mind your manners, law-dog," Gospel corrected. "I don't hold with killing—as you know—but you don't

know either side of the story yet. Hold judgement until you know for sure."

"Don't tell me how to do my law-work," Saint John said, angrily. "Hold up your right hand; I deputize you as part of a posse to bring in the killer!"

Gospel Cummings shook his head. "I'm not the law, which is why I've lived back here as long as I have; on top of that, Ace Fleming is a friend of mine!"

"He killed a man!" Saint John shouted.

"Did you *see* him kill the deceased?"

"Are you a lawyer?" the deputy countered.

"No, and neither are you—so don't get high and mighty with me. You'll find a bottle under my bunk. Drink hearty."

THE BURLY deputy picked up the bottle, unstoppered it, and drank deeply. He passed the bottle to Cummings who pleaned the neck by plopping a finger in the opening. Cummings turned his back, made a mark with his thumb, and drank down past the mark.

Saint John watched the tall plainsman with speculative eyes. Gospel Cummings had been cowboy, trapper and Indian fighter. He was fast with his sixshooter, but he never killed; he lived by the code of Holy Writ—except for his one besetting sin.

"You carry your licker well," the deputy said.

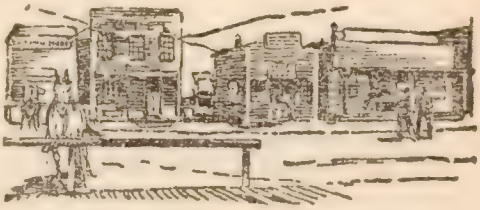
"Just a suggestion," Cummings said, quietly. "Never mind Ace Fleming; you can see him any time. Better take after Cord Demingway—he's wanted by the law in seven states."

"Good idea," Saint John agreed. "No one in these parts can read sign like you, Gospel. Take on to side me as a Special Deputy, and we will leave at daybreak for the mesas."

"My business is here," Cummings refused slowly. "I've been paid to read the service for Pete Lagrue, and I've already spent part of the fee. Some other cowboy; not me."

"Afraid mebbe," the big deputy taunted, but he got no rise from Cummings. "The years are slowing you down," Saint John added.

"It might be like you say," Cummings agreed. "All of which don't buy you any free heroes to help you do the work you get paid to do. You might try to raise a posse on the Circle F."



"Reminds me I've got to see Fleming," the deputy remarked; "like as not, he will be running the games up at the *Casino*."

"Have one for the road," Gospel suggested, and he pushed the almost-empty bottle toward Saint John. "A cowboy can't stand on one leg."

"Don't mind if I do," the deputy accepted, and raising the bottle to his lips, he emptied it at a draught. He nodded at Cummings, left the cabin, and mounted his horse for the short ride back to Vaca.

Gospel Cummings sighed as he sat down at his table. He opened the Book and began to read slowly, savoring the words of wisdom which had come down through the ages. Once he raised his head slightly, and then went on with his reading.

He showed no surprise when a rough voice spoke suddenly from the open door. "Elevate, you old Sin-buster; get them dew-claws ear-high before I bust a cap!"

"Enter in peace, Demingway," Cummings answered, calmly; "I was expecting you after the law cleared out."

"You're a damn old liar!" the outlaw contradicted flatly. "You thought I was back on the mesas."

Cummings turned slowly and studied his visitor. Cord Demingway was a cowboy gone wrong. Six feet tall, a hundred and seventy pounds, wolf-lean, and on the prod. He held one of a pair of sixshooters in his lean right hand; stared at Cummings with black eyes that did not wink.

"I was right outside under that window," he boasted. "Heard every word you and the Saint said. Good thing you refused to take that law-badge."

CUMMINGS nodded as he stared at the spare gun in the tall outlaw's left holster. He could see five notches whittled on the cedar handles; there were probably as many more on the meat-gun Demingway held in his steady right hand.

"I wouldn't have read the sign that-away," Gospel said slowly. "The way you tell it now, you got those notches by sneaking up and shooting your victims in the back. A man don't usually do that who has what you might call gun-pride!"

Cord Demingway's finger tightened on the trigger. "Unsay them words!" he ordered. "Or I'll. . ."

"You'll prove I was right," Cummings finished for him. "I said to enter in peace, so you can holster your weapon. What did you want to see me about?"

"I know your rep," the outlaw growled. "Tricky as an old coon, and fairly fast on the draw-and-shoot. I'll keep the difference handy."

"Mebbe you was forced into a life of crime," the old plainsman said soothingly. "Chances are a couple of fellows threw you down on the ground and twisted your arms until you promised to rustle cattle, steal women, and make war on children."

Demingway's dark face clouded with anger; then he smiled coldly and controlled his wrath. "I've heard a lot about you, Cummings," he said slowly. "Aside from roosting just outside this skull-orchard like a damn buzzard, waiting for a chance to pick up some easy money, you've got a rep for minding your own business."

"Which I was doing when you came a-busting in on me," Cummings reminded. "You've got something on your conscience, so unload it and ride off."

"You stay away from that gold mine," Demingway ordered harshly; "did you say anything to Fleming?"

Gospel made no pretense of innocence; he knew the badlands better than any working cowhand in and around Vaca. He knew that he had been seen the day he had almost stumbled on the workings deep in the badlands on Circle F graze. He shook his head slowly.

"I figured that was the first honest work those gun-hawks of yours had done in years," he answered—"sluicing out pan-gold from the waters of Lost River. How much of a share do they get?"

"Share and share alike, with me taking two shares by right of discovery," Demingway answered, without evasion. "Like you told the Saint, I'm wanted in seven states. Word came back from Kid Curry down in South America that a man with a little dinero can live there like a king. I might go for a look."

"The Pampas of Argentine is as big as Texas," Cummings stated quietly. "The gauchos are tougher than our own cowhands, and plenty gutty. How long will it take your boys to clean out that pocket?"

"How'd you know it was a pocket?" Demingway growled.

"I found that claim ten years ago," Cummings answered with a shrug. "I wasn't cut out for shovel-work like you know."

"Now it's different," the outlaw said slowly. "Pete Lagrue was my *segundo*—my saddle-pard. Ace Fleming killed him!"

"Ace allowed he caught Pete rustling one of his steers," Cummings answered.

"A man has to eat, and that gambler has plenty," Demingway retorted.

CUMMINGS said patiently, "Now look, fella; I never saw the cowman yet who objected to a hungry man getting himself some camp-meat. What he does not like is for some freebooter to shoot a steer, cut out the steaks and tenderloins, and leave the rest for the varmints. If you'd skinned out a carcass, hung the hide up to dry, and packed the meat back to your hide-out, Ace wouldn't have said a word."

"We take what we want," Demingway boasted; "it would have been different if Fleming had jumped me instead of Pete."

"No different," Gospel contradicted quietly. "Ace is the fastest gunhawk in these parts; I've seen him work several times."

"You ever see me work?"

Cummings shook his head. "A man can't do his best fighting when he knows he is wrong," he said slowly.

"That's why I hung around," Demingway answered. "Get the word to that runty gambler that I taken up for my pard; I'll meet him some day for a clean break and a fast showdown."

Gospel Cummings sighed as he stroked his silky brown beard. "It's a shame you won't get to see the Argentine," he murmured; "beautiful country, and life there is easy."

"I'll send you a postcard," Demingway sneered.

Again Cummings shook his head. "You won't," he said emphatically—"not if you take showdown to Ace Fleming."

"You tell him what I said," Demingway growled. "That's all you've got to do!"

Gospel slowly raised his head and stared at the dark, arrogant face above him. "I'm not an errand-boy," he replied, with quiet dignity; "tell him yourself. And don't put too much dependence in that hideout of yours," he warned. "I've been back there in Lost River Cave many's the time. After all, this is home to me."

A bleak expression of dismay crossed the outlaw's thin features. "Mebbe I ought to let you have it now," he said harshly; "you know too much!"

Cummings reached out his left hand slowly, carelessly caught the knotted end of a light rope which hung on the wall. His gaunt face changed as he glared at the arrogant outlaw.

"Look just over my head," he said very softly. "Perhaps you can see a scattergun looking right into your face. This twine is tied to the trigger, with the hammer on full cock; you still want to rub me out, you thieving sinner?"

Cord Demingway's finger tightened on the trigger of his sixshooter. His eyes raised involuntarily to the wall behind Cummings. He caught a quick, short breath when he saw the round and gaping muzzle of a shotgun pointing at his broad chest.

"It would be a draw," Cummings warned. "You still want to play your hand, now that I have openers?"

"I heard you were cagey," Demingway said with a short laugh. "Let's leave it the way you said; a draw. Take your hand away from that rope, and I'll holster my six."

"After you, owlhooter," Cummings said coldly. "Or have it your way!"

DEMINGWAY quickly holstered his sixshooter. "I'd have got you first," he growled.

"But you'd have gone with me," Cummings amended; "do you want to live forever?"

"Just long enough to square up an old debt," Demingway answered sullenly. "You ever hear of Swifty Matthews?"

"He used to be a Texas Ranger," Cummings answered, without hesitation. "Said to be double fast with his smokepoles."

"I had two brothers," Demingway said grimly. "Ace Fleming killed one of them in a poker-game over at Silver City; Swifty Matthews killed the other one down at Laredo."

"Ambitious cuss, ain't you?" Gospel asked. "Either one of those two would be enough for most hard-cases, but you want to make a clean sweep."

"Which is why I want to live," Demingway answered through tightly-clenched teeth. "After that I don't give a damn!"

"Look," the plainsman said. "No man is entitled to more than a fifty-fifty break in life; why not settle for Matthews?"

"You mean because both me and him are outside the law," Demingway answered shrewdly. "But I've waited a long time, and it's...double or nothing!"

"It's quite a jaunt to Laredo," Cummings suggested. "Further still to the Argentine."

"Matthews is here," Demingway said, quietly; "he's looking for Fleming, too!"

"Small world, ain't it?" Cummings answered, to cover his surprise.

"Matthews wants the mine," Demingway said harshly. "We've killed two of his gun-dogs; he tallied for one of mine."

"Mebbe the Saint *does* need some help," Cummings said musingly. "Him being what law we have up here in the Strip, and also being in the middle, you might say."

"Tell the law to stay in town, and I'll do his work for him," Demingway murmured.

"While I'm running errands, you want to send any money to Boothill Crandall?" Gospel asked.

"The undertaker?"

"That's right—in case Ace smokes you down."

"Tell Crandall not to worry," Demingway said with a wolfish grin. "I'll carry a hundred in gold on me at all times. Tell the law it's open season on star-toters; if he or Fleming wants to send any messages, you'll be safe. I'll pay your usual fee every time you ride back to bring me a message—seeing you do most of your work from the saddle; not counting Boothill."

"You might pick out your last resting-place," Cummings suggested. "He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword!"

"Save that palaver for your customers," Demingway snapped. "If you see Matthews, tell him I'm ready any time he is. I've got him faded, and I'll give him a fair chance!"

After the outlaw had gone, Gospel Cummings turned down his lamp. He stretched slowly to his feet, and his big hands were trembling. He reached to a shelf behind a small curtain, took a flask he kept for emergencies, and raised the bottle to his bearded lips. He followed with a quick chaser of the same, wiped his bearded lips with the back of one hand, blew down the lamp chimney, and made ready for sleep.

## 2

A TALL, SLENDER rider drew rein in front of the Cummings cabin, swung to the ground, and tied his sorrel with trailing reins. Gospel Cummings studied the cowboy with critical eyes, noted the double-cinched saddle, tie-fast catch-rope, and heavy bull-hide chaps.

"Howdy, Texas-man," he greeted the young stranger. "Riding far?"

"Vaca-town," the cowboy answered, and his voice was a crisp drawl. "I'm looking for Ace Fleming; you might know him."

"Know him well," Cummings

answered. "Ace runs the *Casino* in town, and the Circle F spread out about seven miles."

"Name's Charley Compton," the stranger introduced himself. "You'll be Gospel Cummings."

"Light, and stay for grub," Cummings invited cordially. "I've got a deer hung out back."

He watched Charley strip his saddle-gear, noting the sure, deft movements of the cowboy's hands. Compton also wore a sixshooter thonged low on his right leg—standard equipment in the high Arizona Strip.

"You looking for work?" Gospel asked carelessly.

"You might say I am," Compton answered.

"John Saint John is the law here," Cummings said slowly. "He's looking for a good fast deputy."

"I could get around that way," Compton said after a pause. "What will he pay?"

"Seventy-five a month and cartridges; he's a domineering So-and-So."

"I can take orders," Compton said shortly. "Any trouble in these parts?"

"Trouble is due to start soon," Gospel offered sagely. "Seems like there are two outlaw-gangs holed up back in the badlands, and they are gunning for each other. They are also gunning for Ace Fleming; mebbe you'd like a riding job with Ace better."

"These owlhooters," Compton said carelessly. "Is one of them Swifty Matthews?"

"You got a grudge to settle?"

"I might have; who's the other one?"

"Cord Demingway," Cummings answered. "Both those long-riders are fast and accurate with their hardware. How about you?"

"I'm twenty-four, and I'm still alive," Compton answered with a trace of youthful pride.

"Being a Texan, you started doing cow-work about the time you could ride good," Gospel said. "I'm a Texan, myself—or I was."

"Yeah, I could tell by the cut of your rigging, and your talk," Compton admitted. "How far is this place they call Dog-Town?"

Gospel Cummings frowned. Dog-Town was three miles east of Vaca, consisted of a small store, two saloons, and row of cribs where the fancy girls and easy women lived. Pug Jones owned both the saloons, and most of the girls work in his saloons on percentage.

"Better stay away from Dog-Town," Cummings advised; "romance comes pretty high in that den of Iniquity."

"You a skypilot?" Compton asked with a grin.

"I am not a man of the cloth," Gospel answered quietly.

"So I'll ride over to Dog-Town when I get hooked up with a job," Compton answered. "Have you seen Matthews?"

"Not in town," Cummings answered. "But if he knows you, chances are he knows you've arrived. He's got three-four hardcases in his gang; Demingway has as many more. Dog-Town being what it is, they meet there once in a while."

"Thanks, old-timer," Compton answered. "When do we start gnawing on that deer you mentioned? I missed breakfast this morning."

"Which I've got a pot of stew simmering on the stove," Gospel said with a smile. "Throw your bronc some blue-stem, and I'll have grub on the table by the time you wash over there at the bench."

THEY WERE finishing the ample meal when Saint John rode down and tied up at the rail. The sun was straight overhead to mark high noon, and the deputy came into the cabin and sniffed.

"There's a plate-full left," Cum-

mings said with a frown. "Deputy Saint John, make you used to Charley Compton from Texas. He might be interested in a deputy job with you."

"Howdy, Compton," Saint John acknowledged the introduction. "If you are just another yearling saddle-tramp riding through, I wouldn't be interested. Are you?"

"I've been a saddle-tramp, and I'm interested," Compton answered crisply. "I can read sign with the best, shoot fairly accurate, and come out fairly fast. What more do you want for seventy-five a month and shells?"

"Salty hairpin, ain't he?" the deputy appealed to Cummings. "I'll think it over while I iron the wrinkles from my belly. Pass the bread, Gospel."

"Never mind the bread; just eat your dinner," Cummings answered caustically. "Reach for it, you overbearing lout, or go hungry."

"Hospitable cuss, ain't he?" Saint John said, as he winked at Charley Compton.

"Off-hand, I'd say Gospel would do to ride the river with," Compton answered frankly.

"Well, you can read sign...some," Saint John admitted, grudgingly. "Do you expect to live forever?"

'Would I be looking for a law-job if I was?"

"I can read sign myself," the deputy answered. "Forget about the girl back home who threw you down; there are plenty more."

Compton tilted his head well back to stare up into the big law-officer's face. His lips opened as though he were about to make a sharp retort, and then he controlled his emotions.

"We were talking about a job," he said quietly; "I don't need any advice about my romantic interests."

"That's one of the first things you would have to learn," Saint John said patronizingly. "To take orders without question, and keep your mouth shut."

"Go to hell," Compton said quietly. "I wouldn't work for you at double the wages."

"You never will learn, Saint," Gospel said wearily. "You paw and beller about needing reliable help to do your law-chores. Free or for pay, you have to ride roughshod over any one who offers to give you a hand."

"Did I ask for a sermon?" the deputy demanded.

"Did *I?*" Compton interrupted. "If you could be bought for what you are worth, and sold for what you think you are worth, a feller wouldn't never have to work again."

Saint John flushed with anger, and he stared at Charley Compton for a long moment. "Where did you say you were from?" he asked.

"I didn't say," Compton answered tartly.

"Stranger, or looking for a law-job, I'd have to know your background," Saint John said, gruffly. "Texas boy, ain't you?"

"That's right—and Texas is a mighty big place," Compton answered. "You say I could like as not find Ace Fleming at the Circle F?" he asked Gospel.

"Look, son," the deputy said sternly. "There's two owlhoot outfits operating in these parts, and you seem to know them both. You just might be a member of one or the other; I'll keep an eye on you for a while."

CHARLEY COMPTON smiled with undisguised amusement. "You sure are going to be busy," he commented. "Watching the Demingway gang, Swifty Matthews, and me. Offhand, I'd say you will need quite a bit of help; and offhand again, I'd say you are going to have a time finding that help. You don't mind now, I'll be riding along—minding my own business."

"You'll sit right there until you answer my questions," Saint John blustered. "Or I'll place you under arrest for suspicion!"

"Suspicion of what?" Compton asked slowly.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Saint John said; "but it could be two or three things."

Charley Compton half-turned, his

right hand flashed down with unbelievable speed, and before he could move, John Saint John was looking into the muzzle of a Peacemaker forty-five.

"Name just one," Compton said quietly. "If it has any merit, I'll surrender for questioning; but you can't bully me worth a damn!"

"That sounds fair enough to me," Gospel Cummings interrupted with a smile. "What's the charge, deputy?"

Saint John sputtered and then looked past Compton. "Ace Fleming coming," he said suddenly. "Ace will help the law!"

"Think up a new one," Compton said, then cocked his head to listen. He swiveled his head to stare briefly up the road leading to town, holstered his weapon when he saw a little man coming on a big horse, and hooked both thumbs in his belt.

Ace Fleming rode into the little yard, a picture of sartorial elegance. The gambler wore tailored clothing, hand-made boots, and a 5X Beaver Stetson. He also wore a brace of six-shooters thonged low on his legs, and an air of competence.

"You need any help to do your law-work?" he asked Saint John.

"Ace, make you acquainted with Charley Compton from Texas," Cummings spoke up. "Charley, make you used to Ace Fleming, boss of the Circle F. He just refused to work for the Saint," Gospel added.

"I could use a good gun-hand," Fleming said slowly; "I'll top the law by ten dollars a month and found."

Charley Compton swallowed noisily. "How do you know I'm not an outlaw?" he asked, with a grin at the deputy.

"I can read sign some," Fleming answered. "You're hired, and what you did in your mis-spent past is your own business."

"Boss, you've hired a man," Compton said soberly; "I'll try to earn my pay."

He watched Saint John as he spoke; mostly he watched the big man's hands. After that exhibition of speed, Saint John made no attempt to get at his holster.

"Are you resisting arrest?" he asked sternly.

"Not if you have some charge," Compton answered quickly. "But if you arrest me, and are wrong, I'll sue the pants off you—and I've got two witnesses!"

"I'll know where to find you," Saint John said with a shrug.

"Swifty Matthews is here, and he's gunning for you, Ace," Cummings interrupted. "Seems like Charley knows both Matthews and Demingway, but I'd like to tell him one thing when he starts hunting."

"Thou shalt not kill," Fleming quoted softly. "That it?"

"Right," Cummings growled. "With his speed, he don't have to ride around killing his fellow-humans!"

"I never learned to throw off my shots, when a man is gunning for me," Compton said stiffly.

"A man after my own heart," Fleming applauded; "I've lost quite a few steers lately, and I mean to abate the nuisance."

SAINT JOHN said loudly, "Now hear me, you two gun-hawks; I catch either one of you staging a man-hunt on your own, you will both answer to the law!"

"Subside," Fleming replied, quietly. "It's always open season on lobos and outlaws. You haven't had any howling success running down Cord Demingway and his gang, and they've been here two years. If I can't get any help from the law, I don't want any interference; do I make myself clear?"

"You can't talk to me as if I were one of your hired hands!" Saint John flared angrily.

"The hell I can't," Fleming answered smoothly. "I help pay your wages, and I expect something for my taxes. When I don't get that something, I help myself. You ready to ride, Compton?"

Gospel Cummings listened with a

smile on his bearded face. It was an old story to him; Saint John always antagonized those he needed most.

"As soon as I tighten my cinches," Compton answered, and Fleming watched him as he readied his riding gear. A bedroll was strapped behind the Texan's saddle; after he had mounted, he turned his horse to face Cummings.

"Thanks for a mighty fine bait of grub, Gospel," he said earnestly. "I'll give some thought to what you said."

"Don't leave the county," Saint John ordered; "that razzle-dazzle you pulled don't scare me a bit!"

"Like you said, lawman," Compton agreed quietly. "It was nice meeting up with you. *Hasta la vista!*"

"You damn right we will meet again," the deputy promised.

Compton rode west and north with Ace Fleming, and when they were over the rise, the gambler spoke curiously. "What do you know about Cord Demingway?" he asked.

"He's an outlaw," Compton said slowly. "A gambler killed his brother, Jim, over in Silver City back a few years."

Ace Fleming turned abruptly in the saddle. His dark eyes probed at Compton's face, and then the gambler smiled.

"Yeah, I killed Jim Demingway," he admitted. "He tried to run in two extra aces in a game of Draw—but they didn't help his hand much. What's between Demingway and Matthews?"

"Swifty Matthews killed Joe Demingway down in Laredo," Compton answered carelessly.

"You've been a lawman," Fleming said carelessly, and now it was Compton who whipped about in his saddle.

"You're guessing," he said lightly.

FLEMING shook his head. "It always leaves a mark on any man who rides behind a law-star," he stated frankly. "It always shows up when gunplay begins. A lawman has to give every man a chance. Now me, I'm a Texan like yourself; but my old Dad taught me years ago never to shuck my sixshooter unless I mean to come out shooting!"

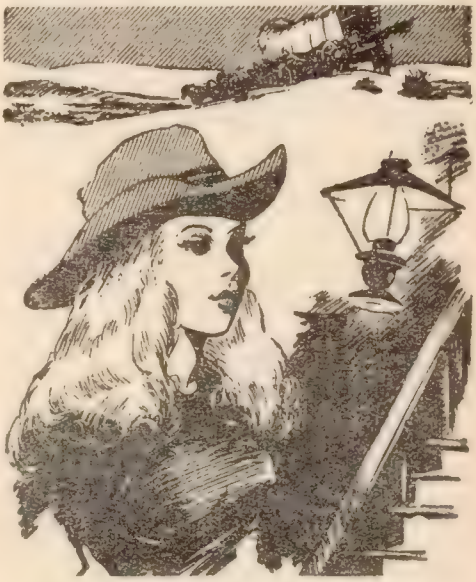
"You've got me there," Compton admitted. "But Saint John is a good lawman the way I read his brands and ear-markings. Overbearing and arrogant, but he don't lack none for sand."

"That's the Saint," Fleming agreed. "Why didn't you sign on with him?"

"He got to giving me advice, and asking too many questions," Compton answered shortly.

Fleming changed the subject, abruptly. "About the Circle F; you'll ride the wide circles for a while until you learn the range. We'll eat you in the kitchen, and sleep you in the bunkhouse with the other Circle F hands."

"Suits me fine, boss," Compton answered with a smile. "I'll try to earn my pay."



"You will," Fleming said quietly. "Did the Saint tell you to stay away from Dog Town?" he asked.

"Him and old Gospel both," Compton answered in a growl.

"Gospel Cummings ain't so old," Fleming said slowly; "forty-five at the most, I'd say. Finest man in Vaca, and he spent most of his riding-pay for years, raising my wife. She came over

here to visit him from San Francisco, and I've loved her ever since. Another thing, Compton. I saw you draw, and you are plenty fast shedding leather; Gospel is faster!"

"The hell you whisper!" Compton burst out.

"Simmer down," Fleming said soothingly. "Gospel never hunts trouble, and has never been known to kill."

Compton stopped his horse and indicated a distant rider on a high ridge as a faint shot echoed back from the rimrock.

"Let's ride up there," Fleming suggested.

They could see the rider disappear over the far rise, and when they reached the ridge, Fleming pointed to a piece of paper fastened to a stick.

"Listen to this," he said, as he reached for the paper.

*Fleming: If Matthews don't whittle your notch, the undersigned will cut it. Tell Compton to ride back to Texas...or else.*
*Demingway.*

"He knows you," Fleming said. "You want to tell me?"

"No," Compton replied.

Fleming shrugged. "In due time," he murmured. "Want you to meet a salty hairpin on my payroll—boy by the name of Skid Yancey. If you have to ride to Dog Town, take Skid along."

Compton raised his rifle and triggered a shot just as the hat flew from Fleming's head. They put their horses into a dead run, and a moment later reined in beside a wounded man in the grass. Compton dismounted and knelt.

"The boss will tally for you, Charley," the man said weakly; "I was shooting at that gambler!"

"Name is Jud Thompson," Compton explained. "I worked with him down in Texas. Anything to say before you cash in?" he asked.

"Money in hip pocket for funeral," Thompson murmured. "I'll see you both...in hell!"

Fleming closed the staring eyes, and reached into the dead man's hip pocket. He drew out six double-eagles, just as a slender raced down the slope on a sweating horse. Compton recognized Skid Yancey from Fleming's description. He nodded when the gambler made the introductions.

"You must have been stalking Thompson," Compton said to Yancey.

"Are you a law-dog?" Yancey demanded.

"I was one time, but not any more," Compton answered with a smile.

"That's good enough for me," Yancey conceded. "Let's load this hombre on his horse and take him to Boothill Crandal in Vaca."

"Take this money for the funeral," Fleming said. "Notify Saint John, and then get back to the Circle F."

As Yancey rode away with the lead horse, Fleming spoke to Compton. "There's a mighty good hand. His worst fault is women, but that's his business. Not more than twenty-six, and has the guts of the devil. Let's get back to the Circle F."

Back at the ranch, Fleming introduced the new hand to a pretty woman waiting on the porch of the comfortable ranch-house.

"Sandra, this is Charley Compton,

our new hand. Compton, my wife."

"Welcome to the Circle F, Charley," Sandra Fleming greeted cordially. "You're a gun-fighter," she said quietly.

"I'll take my soogans to the bunkhouse," Compton excused himself, and rode toward a long low building.

"He's just a boy, Ace," Sandra murmured.

"Don't let that baby-face fool you," Fleming warned. "He's twenty-four, and he's been around; saved my life this morning."

## 3

KID YANCEY rode slowly down the long gradual slope which terminated at Three Points, and Hell's Half Acre. Gospel Cummings came to his cabin door and frowned when he saw the pack horse and its grisly burden. He waited until the slender Circle F cowboy rode up to the rail and dismounted.

"Don't leave the deceased here yet," he cautioned Yancey; "yonder is the road to Vaca, and Boothill Crandall."

"Keep your boots on, Gospel," Yancey answered tartly. "You'll get him back down here in due time; the deceased left some money for you to read his service."

He took a twenty-dollar gold piece from his vest pocket, and flipped it to Cummings, who caught it expertly.

"A hard, dry road from the Circle F," Cummings said quietly. "Come in and have a bit of something."

"I was hoping you'd ask me, Gospel," Yancey admitted frankly. "She's all of three days till pay-day, and me dry as Goose Crick in drought time. Don't mind if I do."

He followed Cummings into the cabin and took the bottle the old plainsman proffered. After a long, hearty drink, he returned the bottle to Cummings.

"I didn't do for the corpse," he said defensively. "That is what remains of the late Jud Thompson out yonder. He put a slug through Ace Fleming's 5X beaver, but the new hand saw the sheen of sun on his rifle barrel, and squeezed off one shot."

"You mean young Charley Compton?" Gospel asked. "He allowed he might throw off his shots."

"At better than two hundred yards with a long-gun, he didn't noways have time," Yancey explained. "Thompson talked a few before he rode on west. Said he had a hundred in his hip pocket to pay Crandall, and also your fee."

"Mebbe he was repentant," Cummings said hopefully. "Sorry for his sins."

"Nary," Yancey contradicted bluntly. "He said he'd see both Ace and Charley in hell, and then he rattled his hocks a few times and transpired."

"Expired," Gospel corrected, with a frown.

"Have it your way," Yancey said, agreeably. "I better be riding into town."

"Have one for the road," Cummings invited; "and don't take Charley over there to Dog Town."

Yancey choked as he was drinking, cleared his throat, and started again with his drink. He passed the bottle back to Cummings, tilted his head acey-deucey, and started for the door.

"A feller has to have some fun," he said slowly. "I'm not riding herd on that Texas boy. See you some more, old-timer."

Yancey climbed his worn saddle and rode up the trail to Vaca town. The light was fading when he stopped in front of the adobe jail. Saint John came out and took a long look at the body lying face-down on the saddle, and anchored to the horse, ankles and wrists.

"The name of the deceased, place of the killing, and the name of the killer," he said importantly.

Skid Yancey squinted up at the big deputy. "Leave me get this straight," he said. "The name of the deceased is the late Jud Thompson, outlaw, part of the Demingway crowd; he was kilt on Circle F range by one Charley Compton, late of Texas. Proceed, Your Honor."

"Comical cuss, ain't you?" Saint John asked, caustically. "Where was Ace Fleming during the shooting?"

"Ace was the target for this dry-gulching son," Yancey explained. "Jud, he was a laying down the hill some two hundred yards, lining his sights on Ace. Charley saw the rifle-barrel, yelled a warning, emptied his own kak, and used one slug on the late Jud. You want I should pack him down to Crandall's, and pay the bill in advance?"

"Those are my orders," Saint John said sternly.

Skid Yancey reared back, threw his head back to get a good look at the deputy, and then mounted his Circle F horse. "Go to hell, law-dog," he said thinly; "you ain't giving me any orders. Take him down there yourself, and I hope you find a hair in your soup!"

HE HIT HIS horse with the hooks, roared down the street before the startled deputy could answer, and took a short-cut to the Circle F. It was an hour after supper when he rode into the ranch and remembered the money in his pocket to pay for Thompson's funeral. He off-saddled, turned his weary horse in with the saddle-band, hurried to the cook-shack, and met Ace Fleming who was just leaving.

"You pay for the funeral?" Fleming asked suspiciously.

"I'm a son-of-a-buck," Yancey murmured. "The boss has turned clara-buoyant on me. I got into an argument with the Saint, and I rode off with the money in my pocket."

"The word is clairvoyant, and I'm not a mind-reader," Fleming said sternly. "I just happen to know your shortcomings, is all. I'll pay Crandall tomorrow when I ride in."

Yancey turned the money over reluctantly. He had thought some of a quick trip to Dog Town, telling himself he could repay the money on pay-day.

"Like you said, boss," he muttered. "A feller can't have no fun on this here treadmill of life."

"Cheer up," Fleming said with a smile. "I want you to ride with Charley Compton tomorrow. Make a wide circle to the badlands, and get an early start. The cooky kept some grub hot for you, so fly at it."

Yancey growled, but he brightened some when Foo Wong placed a plate of hot food before him. The old Chinese cook smiled benevolently as he watched the hungry youngster eat. "You like this new Cholly boy?" he asked Yancey.

"Better not leave him hear you call him Cholly boy," Yancey warned. "He just might raise your hair, you old heathen. Shore I like Charley Compton. You?"

"He will do to take along," Woo Fong said sagely. "Heap brave man, Cholly."

"Aw, he ain't so *bravo,*" Yancey argued, to draw the oldster out.

"He brave," Woo Fong argued stolidly. "Cholly fast like hell with sixshooter, you betcha."

"Tell me more, my Oriental friend," Yancey said, softly. "Mebbe so you see um in big fight, no?"

"Me see," Woo answered proudly. "But Woo talk too much with big mouth wide open; tell you bunch of lies. You forget, yes?"

Yancey hesitated. "Well mebbe, how about an extra cut of green apple pie?"

"Can do," Woo answered quickly. "You forget, cowboy."

YANCEY finished his meal and went to the bunkhouse. Shorty Benson was mending a bridle, and Long Tom Brady was talking quietly to Charley Compton. They glanced up

when Yancey entered, and Compton looked expectantly at Skid's freckled face.

"What did old Gospel say?" he asked.

"Said you might have throwed off your shot to give that sinner time to repent," Yancey said with a grin. "He'll preach you a sermon next time you light down at his place. Seems like I heard somewhere about you being in a big gun-soiree down Texas way a while back."

Compton started and stared at Yancey's guileless face. "Who told you that?" he demanded.

"You know how word gets around on the grapevine," Yancey said, carelessly.

"Must have been some other saddle-tramp," Compton grunted. "How about Saint John?" he changed the subject.

"I rode off and left him with the corpse when he started in to giving me orders," Yancey replied with a grin. "I even forgot to leave the money for Crandall, but the boss read my mind and took it away from me."

"Good thing he did," Tom Brady said with a chuckle. "Or you'd have geared a fresh horse and lit out for the fleshpots in Dog Town."

"I was a-toying with the idea," Yancey admitted, honestly. "There's a new gal over in one of Pug Jones' places, but she's kinda offish. I don't think she's a percentage gal, and I could change my ways for her."

Charley Compton leaned forward, but he did not speak. "What's this filly's handle?" Shorty asked lazily.

"Mona Belle," Yancey answered promptly. "Does something to a feller, a name like that. Pretty, ain't it?"

Charley Compton's eyes narrowed.

Yancey did not notice, and he continued talking. "Seems like an old bar-dog name of Stingaree Burke is her uncle or something," Yancey continued. "He keeps an eye on Mona Belle, and he carries a hog-leg under his apron. Mona Belle looks to be about twenty, built like a Venus, and pretty as a new red wagon!"

"So you better leave her alone, and spend your money on the regular gals," Brady suggested. "I've heard about Stingaree Burke; when he was younger, he was one of the fastest gun-passers on the border. He must be sixty-odd by now."

"Every bit of that," Yancey agreed. "Silver white hair, a thin white mustache, and straight as a pine."

"What's this filly doing in the *Red Rose Saloon?*" Shorty asked curiously.

"Singing, is all," Yancey answered. "And man oh man, can she sing? Low throaty voice that makes the goose pimples rise on your hide. I'd even change my ways, settle down, and go to hell in my bare feets for a filly like Mona Belle!"

He glanced at Compton, narrowed his eyes, and asked a blunt question. "Do you know Mona Belle?"

Compton shrugged. "How do I know until I see her?" he answered crossly. "You don't mind, I'll hit the hay and make up some sleep I lost on the trail."

"Yeah, you do that," Yancey answered. "Ace wants you and me to ride a wide circle tomorrow, back to the lavas. And keep up your strength, Texas boy. You and me are riding into Dog Town Saturday night; it just happens to be pay-day."

"Skid knows all the women yonder," Brady said with a chuckle. "And they all know the pride of the Circle F."

Compton went to his bunk, peeled down to his underwear, and crawled into his blankets. He was asleep almost instantly, despite the murmured conversation of the Circle F crew.

HE AWOKE with the first rays of the sun, put on his hat, stomped into his boots and proceeded to dress. The other members of the crew also crawled out of their bunks, but Yancey and Compton were first at the wash basins outside the bunk-house.

"I'll rope us out a couple of mountain horses after breakfast," Yancey said. "We'll pack along a cold lunch, and get back about dark. How'd you sleep?"

"Perfect," Compton answered with a smile; "I never woke up till the birds began to sing."

"What birds?" Yancey demanded.

"Mebbe you are right," Compton admitted. "Only birds I saw here abouts were hoot-owls."

Yancey stared suspiciously, but Compton only smiled. "You been a owlhooter?" Yancey asked.

"Nuh uh," Compton answered. "But I've rode night-herd many's the time, and so have you. Let's go inside and see what old Woo Fong has on the bill of fare."

"Morning, Cholly," the old cooky greeted Compton as he entered the cook-shack. "Morning, Squid," he said to Yancey.

"The name is Skid," Yancey corrected. "I'll bet a cooky you knew Cholly before you came to the Circle F."

"Look, Squid," Compton said stiffly. "The name is Charley to you."

"And the name is Skid to you," Yancey came back tartly; "so don't get comical."

"It's a deal," Compton agreed.

"Well, did you?" Yancey demanded.

"Did I what?"

"Know that heathen before you both rode up here from Texas?"

"I might have met Woo Fong some place," Compton answered carelessly. "What does it matter? A fella meets lots of folks here and there."

"Ham and eggs, hot cakes, and mush," Woo Fong interrupted. "Boss man say to make up cold meat sandwiches for you today. Can do!"

The rest of the crew trooped in for breakfast, and conversation stopped. The food was delicious and in abundance. Compton finished his hot coffee and rolled a smoke. He walked out with Yancey, who legged it to a large corral with a catch-rope trailing behind him.

"I want that grulla knothead with the Roman nose for my mount," he told Compton. "I'll snare you that mouse-colored gelding with the line-back. Two of the best mountain horses on the spread, and sure-footed as goats."

He made his cast as the milling horses circled past, snared the grulla, and handed the rope to Compton. He took Compton's rope, made a Hollyann catch to snare the line-back, and they led the two horses out and tied up at the rail.

"Why do they call it Dog Town?" Compton asked abruptly.

"Huh? Because most of the women have dogs, and every dog in the neighborhood knows it," Yancey answered with a grin. "It's a free and easy life

over in Dog Town if a gent minds his own business, and has plenty of dinero. Wine, women, and song, and that Mona Belle filly can sure sing."

"They got a hotel or roominghouse over there?" Compton asked carelessly.

"Are you kidding?" Yancey demanded. "There's plenty of places to sleep, and a man don't have to sleep alone."

COMPTON frowned and tightened his latigo. He looped the rear cinch loosely, fastened his head-stall, and swung up to the saddle. The line-back bogged its head and started to buck the kinks from its back, and the Circle F crew watched with interest. Compton rode out the flurry as part of the day's work, gigged a time or two with his drop-shanked spurs when the horse stopped bucking, and turned to Yancey.

"Let's quit the spread," he said; "time's a-wasting."

"So it is," Yancey murmured. "It's every bit of six o'clock; it will soon be noon and half the day is gone."

He jumped his saddle, and the grulla promptly came apart. Yancey gigged slyly with his spurs to put on a show, and he sat his saddle like a tophand riding the first rough-string.

"Now throw his head away," Compton said dryly. "Or shall we get on with the work?"

"Sour-caustic so-and-so, ain't he?" Yancey complained to Shorty Benson.

"He rode Satan, that line-back, didn't he?" Shorty countered. "You figgered the bronc would pitch him, and don't lie about it."

"That's reading sign, my short-legged friend," Yancey admitted. "You made a point there, so we might as well light a shuck. We will see you cow nurses come sundown, unless one of us stops a chunk of owlhoot lead."

"Which, if you do, the whole crew will boil back there and clean out Demingway," Shorty promised fervently. "And some day we'll do it regardless."

"Thanks, podner," Yancey murmured, and he wasn't clowning; "we'll be seeing you."

He left the ranch with Compton rubbing his stirrup and they headed across open range toward the foothills off to the northwest. Yancey was full of questions, but he was also a working cowboy; a man didn't get along too well if he asked too many questions, and he usually got the answers in due time. Yancey nodded; he was content to wait.

"Hossbacker coming," Compton said briefly, and he reached for the Winchester under his left saddle-fender. He held the rifle across his knees as he nodded.

"It's Gospel Cummings," he said, as he recognized the stooped shoulders of the tall plainsman. "Wonder what he's doing back here?"

"Gospel knows this back country better'n any cowhand in the Strip," Yancey explained. "That ain't all," he continued. "He can snake his way into a camp without any one knowing it. Used to live with, and fight the redskins."

"I'd rather have him on my side than against me," Compton confessed. "He's going to give me hell for the Jud Thompson go-around."

GOSPEL CUMMINGS rode off the trail into a stand of scrub oak. His right hand went to the tail of his long coat and came out with a quart bottle of Three Daisies. He pulled the cork with strong teeth, tilted back his head, and quaffed a deep draught. When he rode back to the trail, the tremble had left his strong, brown hands.

"He's afraid some of snake-bite," Yancey murmured; "leave him do the talking."

"Howdy, gents," Cummings greeted the Circle F pair. "I thought you'd be riding this way. Mind if I rub stirrups aways?"

"She's a free country, Gospel," Yancey answered. "Me and Charley will be proud to have your company."

"You sleep good last night?" Gospel asked Compton.

"Slept like a log."

"Your conscience didn't bother you none?"

"Not a bit," Compton answered gravely. "After all, the first law of life is self-preservation. Thompson shot first!"

"I believe you, Charley," Gospel answered. "But there's also another law back here; you might call it jungle-law."

"Meaning what, Gospel?" Compton asked with a puzzled expression on his fighting face.

"The law of tooth and fang, or an-eye for-an-eye," Cummings explained. "You rubbed out the late and unlamented Jud Thompson. Ace Fleming did for Pete Lagrue. Cord Demingway will even the score and there are plenty of places back yonder for a sharpshooter to belly down in the brush. Do I make myself clear?"

Compton nodded. "Like Thompson did," he answered. "We will have to keep our eyes wide open, and our guns close to our hands."

"I can knock off a deer up to five hundred yards, if the wind is right," Gospel said thoughtfully. "That's farther than most men can see."

"I see what you mean," Compton agreed. "So it had something to do with you riding back here to warn me and Skid. We're listening respectful."

Gospel Cummings stroked his luxuriant brown beard. He started to speak, hesitated a time or two, and then cleared his throat.

"I'm what you might call neutral," he stated slowly. "I see a lot of things I keep to myself. The outlaws know this, and most times they treat me accordingly. But you'd find it sooner or later, with your ability to read sign. I'm talking about the gold mine."

"What gold mine?" Yancey blurted out.

"Cord Demingway's mine," Gospel answered crossly. "It's on Circle F range, but Ace Fleming has never found it. It's a rich pocket, but there's enough to take a man to South America, and set him up in the cow business."

"I don't believe Demingway will ever leave the country," Compton declared flatly. "If that pocket is on Circle F range, it belongs to Ace."

"Swifty Matthews found out about that pocket of gold," Cummings said. "If he and Demingway got to fighting each other, it would mean less work for the law."

"Down," Compton said tersely. "Hossbackers coming!"

Cummings reached for a pair of old field glasses. "Four of them," he murmured. "Matthews and three strangers."

Yancey took the glasses and focused on the horsemen. "One of those hombres is Stingaree Burke, bar-dog in the *Red Rose*," he said slowly, and passed the glasses to Compton.

"That's Burke," Compton confirmed.

"Then you know Mona Belle," Yancey declared.

"I've met her," Compton answered, stiffly.

"Saint John was right," Cummings remarked sagely; "he told you to forget the girl who throwed you over down home."

"You don't stand a chance, Charley," Yancey said lazily. "I saw Mona Belle talking intimate to Matthews at the *Red Rose*."

Compton leaped and grabbed Yancey by both arms. He vised down with all his strength, then quickly released his grip. "Don't ever hooraw me again about Mona Belle," he warned huskily.

Yancey nodded slowly. "Sorry Charley," he said manfully. "I'd go the whole way for a gal like Mona Belle; and I'll help all I can. My hand on it!"

They gripped hands and stared hard at each other. Compton was the first to smile. "Sorry I manhandled you, Skid," he murmured. "Let's ride up where we can see better, now that you and me are pards."

## 4

CHARLEY COMPTON stared fixedly through the old field-glasses. Swifty Matthews was pointing the lead, like a man who knew where he was going—closely followed by the other three horse-backers.

Gospel Cummings broke in on Compton's thoughts. "They are heading toward Lost River Cave," he said positively. "I wonder why old Stingaree Burke is so interested?"

"I wonder?" Compton repeated. "He must know something that Demingway does not."

"The way I see it, that go-around yonder is a private fight," Cummings said slowly. "It is none of our put-in, and we'd only be in the middle."

Skid Yancey twisted uneasily. "It's on the boss' land," he argued loyally. "And Ace pays me my wages."

"Did you ever see two hawks fighting over a rabbit?" Cummings asked. "They fight and rage and one of them drives the other away. The winner takes the meat and starts for home. Up in an old dead tree, an eagle has been watching this whole business. He takes off with a rush, attacks the winning hawk, makes it drop the rabbit, and the eagle then satisfies his hunger."

Yancey stared at the gaunt plainsman, and a grin broke across his freckled face. "I see what you mean, Gospel," he conceded. "We can let those two owlhooters fight each other, and then Ace can step in to make medicine with the winner."

"Ace, or the law," Gospel corrected. "Stingaree Burke is after something more than that golddust Demingway is washing out."

He spoke slowly, watching Charley Compton's face carefully. Compton lowered the glasses and handed them to Cummings. He merely nodded his head to confirm the plainsman's guess.

Rifle-fire broke out across the foothill graze, continued savagely for a few minutes, and then died away. Three horsemen rode back the way they had come and one of them was leading the fourth horse by the bridle-reins. A man was lying face-down in the saddle and Skid Yancey chuckled without mirth.

"There comes another case for Gospel," he said knowingly. "And it isn't Stingaree or Matthews. What will we do now, Gospel?"

"Stay down," Cummings warned softly. "Yonder comes the law to meet Matthews, and Saint John allows he is big enough to take care of himself."

They watched the tall, blocky deputy ride out to intercept the three men. One of the three cut away from his companions and spurred his horse toward the east.

"That's Swifty Matthews," Compton said, after a hasty glance through the glasses. "He's leaving Burke to do the explaining."

"I reckon it's safe to take a pasear over there now," Cummings said. "But remember; none of us will serve in a posse."

They left the little wallow and rode at an angle toward Saint John, who was riding to intercept Burke and his companion. The deputy reached the group first, but he had seen Cummings and his companions riding up for a meet.

"Stop in the name of the law!" the deputy commanded loudly.

Stingaree Burke reined in and faced his horse toward the towering peace-officer. Cummings and his companions reached there at the same time, but none of the three spoke; Saint John would do the talking, and he was glaring at Stingaree Burke.

Burke might have been a cavalry-officer from his erect appearance. His age was past sixty, but he was straight as a pine, and carried himself with a quiet dignity.

"The name is Burke, officer," he said to Saint John. "We were riding for our health when we were attacked by bandits hiding over by that little stream. Tom Jenkins was killed by bushwhack lead, and we were taking him back to town."

Saint John whipped about in the saddle to face Gospel. "Did you rannies do for the deceased?" he demanded.

"Use your head for something beside a peg to hang your hat on, Saint," Cummings growled. "You saw the direction we came from."

"Are you Gospel Cummings?" Burke asked.

"The same, and you must be Stingaree Burke."

"Correct, and I'm glad to meet you," Burke answered. He gave no sign that he recognized Charley Compton, but he nodded to Skid Yancey.

"Stingaree is a bardog over in Dog Town, Saint," Yancey explained. "He ladles up the forked lightning in the *Red Rose*."

Stingaree Burke nodded and smiled. "I never touch strong drink myself," he said; "my weakness is gambling."

GOSPEL CUMMINGS winced, and nodded his shaggy head. "Life is like that," he conceded. "One man smokes the weed, and another dips snuff."

"Enough of this palaver," Saint John said sharply. "Who do you think dryguched Jenkins?"

"We never saw them close-up," Burke said, hesitantly; "I really couldn't say."

"Just a minute, Burke," Saint John interrupted. "I recognized Swifty Matthews dogging it away from the law; a man is usually known by the company he keeps."

"So that makes my companions all bar-keepers," Burke said with a smile.

"Don't cloud the sign," Saint John said sternly. "I demand to know what you were doing out here with Matthews?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that I might incriminate myself," Burke said politely. "And I am signing no complaints. Just tell the Coroner that Tom Jenkins came to his death from gunshot wounds at the hands of a person or persons unknown!"

"Don't tell me how to do my lawwork!" the deputy bellowed.

"Sorry," Burke murmured. "I doubt your authority to question me without a warrant on some specific charge."

"Prairie-lawyer ain't you?" Saint John sneered.

Burke surprised them by his answer. "I was an attorney at one time; but that was many years ago."

"I'll be damned," Yancey ejaculated. "Stingaree was lawsharp!"

"Who is your young friend, Skid?" Burke asked.

"Thought you two knew each other," Yancey answered. "Charley Compton, make you acquainted with Stingaree Burke. Stingaree; Charley."

"Howdy," Compton said slowly.

"Glad to know you, Compton," Burke answered. "Texas man, are you not?"

"That's right," Compton replied.

Gospel Cummings listened with his head cocked to the side. A puzzled expression appeared in his deep-set brown eyes, but he remained silent.

Burke reached out and handed the bridle-reins of the led horse to Saint John. "As the law, I turn over the body to you, Mister deputy," he said politely. "I'll pay for his funeral, and a fee for Mister Cummings if he will be so kind as to read a service for the departed."

"Mebbe you better ride into Vaca with me as a material witness," Saint John growled.

"You can find me any time at the *Red Rose,* in Dog Town," Burke answered. "I am gainfully employed, and there is nothing I can add to what I have already told you."

"Just a minute," Saint John said bluntly. "Who's this other hombre with you?"

"Tim Kelly," Burke answered for his companion. "He works for Pug Jones, dispensing hospitality at the *Silver Dollar.*"

"Happy to meet you," Kelly said to Saint John. "I was just an innocent bystander."

THE DEPUTY looked down at the rifle in Kelly's scabbard. "You've been smoking that long-gun!" he accused.

"That's right," Kelly admitted. "What would you do if outlaws attacked you from the bresh? ...Howdy, Yancey."

"Howdy, Kelly. Did you tally for any of Demingway's outfit?"

"Who's this Demingway character?" Kelly asked, innocently.

"You better give up, Skid," Cummings advised. "Kelly refuses to answer on advice of counsel; right, Burke?"

"Just a minute," Saint John shouted, and his florid face was almost black with anger. "I deputize you two Circle F hands—and you too, Gospel; we'll take these two Dog Town hombres into town for questioning!"

"Count me out," Yancey said quickly. "Charley and me have work to do."

"Likewise," Cummings made it unanimous.

"Fan out!" Burke said suddenly, and he reined his horse to the right.

Tim Kelly turned to the left, leaving Saint John holding the led horse in the middle.

"Which one of us do you want the most?" Burke asked politely.

Saint John's face turned purple with rage. "Take that Kelly!" he shouted at Cummings. "I'll take Burke!"

Stingaree Burke flipped his right hand, and a long-barreled sixshooter appeared miraculously to cover the deputy. Saint John stared stupidly; both hands were occupied with bridle-reins.

"Resisting arrest!" he shouted. "Drop that gun and surrender before I match my draw against your drop!"

"Don't be a fool, Saint," Cummings said quietly; "you've got nothing against Burke, and we all know it!"

Stingaree Burke holstered his weapon smoothly, reached into a vest pocket, and handed Gospel six pieces of gold. "Thank you, Cummings; and I'd take it kindly if you would pay for the services for the late Tom Jenkins," he said quietly. "You can find me at the *Red Rose* any time you want me, Saint John," he told the deputy; and reining his horse, with a nod at Kelly, the two rode eastward.

Saint John watched them go with his mouth open, and nothing to say. Skid Yancey stared at the dead man on the saddle and spoke to Cummings. "Three will get you five, that one will get Saint John two," he said cryptically.

"I hope you are wrong," Cummings said, quickly; "there has been enough killing."

"Tim Kelly is one of the best rifleshots in these parts," Yancey explained. "When he smokes his long-gun, there's meat on the table!"

"Meaning he like as not got one of Demingway's crowd?" Charley Compton asked.

Yancey nodded. "I've seen Tim shoot," he admitted. "He can shoot

the eye from a snake at a hundred yards, and call which eye!"

"I'll ride back to town with you, Saint," Cummings offered; "these two Circle F hands have their own work to do."

"We'll tie this horse up and ride over to Lost River first," Saint John said curtly.

"Not me," Cummings refused. "And you make a mighty big target your ownself."

"I'm rodding the law in these parts!" Saint John shouted. "You'll do it the way I say!"

Gospel Cummings gathered up his bridle-reins. "Well, it was nice meeting you again, Saint," he said quietly. "You go your way, and I'll go mine."

"Me and Charley will go ours," Yancey added. "So long, gents!"

JOHN SAINT JOHN was left in the clearing holding the reins of the led horse. He glared savagely in two directions, and then called gruffly to Gospel Cummings.

"Hold up a spell, you damned old Sin-buster. I'll ride in with you!"

Gospel disappeared into the trail-side brush, found solace from the right tail of his coat, and rode out to meet the glowering deputy. "Look, Saint—which you ain't—you go to calling me a Sin-buster one more time, and I'll take it personal. I don't have to put up with your bad manners or temper, and you remember what I said!"

"Sorry I called you out of your name Gospel," Saint John said, contritely. "But there's days it seems a feller would be ahead just to stay in bed. Nothing turns out the way I figure it, and I never can get any help when I need it the most."

"You always got help when you *really* needed it," Cummings corrected. "But in fifteen years you've never learned that you can't go faunching and bellering through life, and making other folks like it. You keep telling folks that you're the law up here in the Strip, and then ordering other people to do the work you get paid to do."

"I ain't satisfied none about that Stingaree Burke," Saint John growled. "I'm going to ride over there to *Red Dog* one of the days soon, and have a long talk with that old son."

"Better talk soft," Cummings advised. "Did you notice the way he skinned the leather off that old smoke-pole of his?"

"This country is getting lousy with fast gun-hawks," the deputy complained. "I ain't satisfied about that young Charley Compton, either."

"You didn't like Ace Fleming for the same reason, when he first came here," Cummings reminded. "Not forgetting Skid Yancey, Swifty Matthews, and Cord Demingway."

"That's what I mean," Saint John complained. "Boothill will be filled up before this ruckus is over, and I don't even know what it's all about."

"That's the pity of it," Cummings agreed sadly.

They rode along in silence for a time, started down the long slope to Three Points, and Saint John growled as he pointed toward a horse tied at the rail near the Cummings cabin.

"Another owlhooter," he said hoarsely. "Like as not the hombre Tim Kelly killed with his rifle."

Cummings swung down, stripped his riding gear, and went to his cabin. He was staring at a paper and some pieces of gold when Saint John entered.

"The deceased is one Sid Simon," Cummings said, wearily. "With his funeral paid for in advance."

Saint John walked out and tied the horse he had led, to the rail. Each saddle carried a dead man; Sid Simon, and Tom Jenkins. The deputy mounted as Cummings came to the cabin door.

"I'll send Boothill Crandall down with his wagon," he told Cummings. "You will get them back in due time."

*"Vaya con Dios,"* Cummings murmured in Spanish. "Go thou with God!"

BACK ON the high trail, Skid Yancey turned to Charley Compton

with an eager look in his eyes. "How you fixed for spending-money?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm holding a few dollars," Compton answered; "will twenty be enough?"

"I'll pay you back Saturday," Yancey promised. "Let's circle around and ride into Dog Town. Stingaree Burke wanted to talk to you, and I saw him give you the high-sign."

"Be late afternoon by the time we got there," Compton replied. "What high-sign?"

"When I introduced you to him," Yancey answered. "I can read sign some. Was he really a lawyer one time?"

"From what I hear, he practiced down in El Paso," Compton said carelessly. "But he has a besetting sin, like he said. With old Gospel, it's strong drink; with Stingaree, it's gambling."

"With me, it's women," Yancey confessed. "Anything wrong with that?" he demanded truculently.

"Lay your hackles, cowboy," Compton said quietly. "Your morals are your own business, and none of mine; let's stop here a while by that creek and eat our meat sandwiches."

Money changed hands before they tightened their cinches for the ride to Dog Town. Yancey tucked the twenty dollars into his vest pocket, rolled a smoke, and flicked a match to flame with a thumb-nail.

"Wait until you hear Mona Belle sing," he said in a hushed voice. "She's like an angel."

"Yeah," Compton agreed. "So just remember that."

"Meaning anything personal?" Yancey demanded instantly.

"Yeah, I do," Compton answered bluntly. "In Texas there are only two kinds of women—good and bad. You were speaking about an angel."

"I could mend my ways," Yancey flared angrily.

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They rode into the sprawling little settlement of Dog Town about three o'clock, entering from the west. A dozen dogs slept in the shade from low buildings; other dogs barked from the windows of a long, low building where each room had a private door from the outside.

"Those are what old Gospel calls 'The fleshpots of Iniquity', and that little white cottage with the picket fence is where Stingaree and Mona Belle lives," Yancey explained. "She has a big black dog named Major, for company and protection."

They tied up at the rack in front of the *Red Rose* saloon and went inside. A stocky, wide-shouldered man nodded at Yancey, and stared at Compton. Yancey made the introductions.

"Pug Jones, meet Charley Compton. How's every little thing?"

"Tolable; you and your pard staying overnight?" Jones asked.

"I'm a working man," Yancey answered.

"One of my boys was killed this morning," Jones said sourly. "You know anything about it?"

"No one lives forever," Yancey said. "Let's get a drink, Charley."

STINGAREE BURKE served Yancey whiskey straight, and drew a small beer for Compton. Yancey asked softly: "Did you tell Mona Belle that Charley is here?"

"She knew it," Burke answered, stiffly; "she has nothing to say to Compton."

"You heard Stingaree," a voice said, and Compton turned to face Pug Jones. "Stay away from Mona Belle!"

Compton stared at Jones. "Are you asking for trouble?" he asked bluntly.

"Yeah; start wingin' when you're a mind!"

Compton's right hand moved like heat lightning. His gun-muzzle was buried in the saloon-man's middle. Jones elevated both hands.

"Don't trigger," Jones whispered. "I talked out of turn!"

"No hard feelings," Compton said, as he holstered his sixshooter.

Jones retreated, and Yancey downed his drink. "Let's drift," he suggested; "I know how Jones works."

They walked outside and mounted their horses, riding out of town. "Jones is boss of Dog Town," Yancey said slowly. "He's a dirty fighter, but he don't lack for guts."

"I'm stopping at the little white cottage," Compton said. "I'd prefer to go alone."

"I'll side you," Yancey said firmly. "Up this alley."

A low growl came from inside the cottage when Yancey knocked on the door. He said quickly: "It's Skid Yancey from the Circle F. A friend of yours wants to say Hello."

The door opened, and a beautiful girl stood framed in the doorway. She gasped when she saw Compton. "Go away, Charley," she whispered. "The answer is still...No!"

"Don't go riding, Mona Belle," Compton said slowly. "Could I just scratch Major's ears?"

The door bounced open as a Labrador retriever jumped on Compton. It was evident that the two were old friends, and Compton spoke to Yancey. "Stay with the horses, Skid."

He pushed into the house, turned, and opened his arms as the girl closed the door. Mona Belle shook her head. "My last name is Courtney, remember?" she said.

She was of medium height, and superbly made. Her skin was a dusky rose, accentuated by dark hair and eyes. Compton took her in his arms and kissed her lips.

"I'd kill any other man in Dog Town who did that," Mona Belle said quietly. "Goodbye, Charley Compton!"

## 5

GOSPEL Cummings filled a wooden tub with water, which he heated on his old wood stove. The day was Friday; there would be four services that afternoon in Hell's Half Acre. There was little he could say for the four men who had met a sudden and violent death, but Gospel would say that little reverently, leaving the judgment to a higher power.

He could follow the admonitions of the Book, which said that cleanliness was next to Godliness. This was a customary habit with the gaunt plainsman; he scrubbed himself thoroughly and dressed in clean clothing, most of which he had laundered himself. The suit he kept for such occasions was brushed; his best boots were neatly polished. A black, string tie was knotted under the collar of his white linen shirt; his black-butted six-shooter was tied-down and toed-in on his long right leg.

Saint John had arranged with Boothill Crandall to have a joint burial—a procedure to which Cummings had made no protest; the mourners would be few, if any.

Cummings finished dressing, with trembling hands. He glanced through the front window to see that no one observed him, then reached for a quart of Three Daisies and made a careful mark with his left thumb. His calculations were in error as always; he drank deeply, and past the mark. But the tremble had left his strong, brown hands when he replaced the bottle under the head of his bunk.

Cummings ate a simple meal and washed the few dishes. Then he shrugged into his long-tailed coat, set his best black Stetson firmly on his head, and picked up the Bible from the deal table. There was a moody expression in his deep-set brown eyes; a brooding sadness for those who broke the commandment which admonished: *Thou shalt not kill!*

The click of shod hooves turned Gospel's eyes to the sloping trail that led down from the Circle F. His eyes widened when he saw Ace Fleming riding down with his wife, Sandra. Then came Skid Yancey with Charley Compton and Shorty Benson. Cummings remembered that Fleming always attended the services of those he had helped to another world.

He turned to the door when hoofs sounded from the road leading to Vaca town. A tall white-haired man was riding with a remarkably pretty girl. This would be Stingaree Burke, who was flanked on the left by Tim Kelly, bartender in the *Silver Dollar* over at Dog Town. The girl would be Mona Belle, Burke's niece, the daughter of his only sister. She was dressed in a riding costume with a divided skirt, just as Sandra Fleming was dressed.

"She is beautiful," Gospel murmured. "With a trace of Spanish blood, unless I mis-read the signs. I wonder why Burke brought her to the burials?"

He sought solace in a last drink before leaving his cabin. The rattle of wheels told him that Crandall was approaching, this time with two wagons. Saint John rode ahead of the first black wagon, and the deputy had a Winchester in the saddle-boot under his left leg. John Saint John never left any doubt as to who was the law in the Strip.

Gospel Cummings left the cabin and walked to the entrance of the burying-ground. He preceeded the first wagon, walking with measured tread to the spot where four graves had been prepared. He took a position at the head of one of the graves and slowly removed his hat. Four Mexican grave-diggers waited a respectful distance with their heads uncovered.

Boothill Crandall tooled his team expertly, and swung his wagon into position. The driver of the second wagon alighted to help Crandall. They placed the coffins on stakes laid across the graves, and retreated to stand by their teams.

Ace Fleming and Sandra dismounted and left the horses with Shorty Benson. Compton and Yancey took positions across from the Flemings, and all removed their hats out of respect for the departed.

Stingaree Burke and his niece approached in silence with Tim Kelly, whose accurate rifle had accounted for one of the outlaws. John Saint John dismounted with a flourish to call attention to the authority of the vested law; the big deputy wore a coat in deference to the solemn occasion. He glanced at Cummings and spoke in a low rumbling voice which was meant to be a whisper, but which came out like a muffled foghorn. "You may proceed with the ceremonies, Gospel."

"Thank you," Cummings murmured. "You will please remove your hat."

SAINT JOHN huffed, but he removed his headgear. Cummings opened the Book and began to read in a low clear voice of remarkable quality. The service was brief; there was no euology. As Cummings closed his Book, he leaned over and picked up a fresh clod which he crumpled between his strong fingers and sprinkled into the grave before him.

"Dust to dust," he said conclusively. *"Vaya con Dios!"*

"Go thou with God, Amen!" one of the Mexican grave-diggers repeated, and devoutly blessed himself.

Gospel Cummings nodded and left the graves. He walked sedately through the place of the doomed and the damned, but his pace quickened as he left the volcanic portals, and hurried to his cabin. His hand reached for, and found, the bottle of

whiskey—a hand which was trembling slightly—a hand which was once more steady when Cummings replaced the bottle under his bunk. Then he went out to the tie-rail where the various horsebackers were acknowledging introductions. He heard Charley Compton say. "Mrs. and Mister Fleming, may I present Miss Mona Belle Courtney?"

Sandra went to Mona Belle at once. "I'm so happy to meet you, Miss Courtney."

"Please call me Mona Belle," the girl answered with a flashing smile.

"And you call me Sandra," Fleming's wife agreed. "Please come and stay with us for a visit when you can."

"May I?" Mona Belle asked hesitantly. "Have you met my Uncle, Mr. Burke?"

"Charmed, Mrs. Fleming," Stingaree Burke answered gallantly, and he bowed from the waist.

"My husband, Ace Fleming," Sandra continued. "Now we all know each other," and she saw Cummings. "Gospel, I'm so glad to see you," she cried; "you haven't visited me for two whole weeks."

"I am coming soon, but I love another," Cummings said with a smile. "How is Sugar-Foots?"

"Asking for you every day," Sandra Fleming replied. "That's my two-year-old daughter," she told Mona Belle. "She and Gospel are sweethearts, although her right name is Deloise."

"I've some questions to ask you, Burke," Saint John interrupted importantly.

"Not here," Cummings objected hastily. "This is hardly the time or the place, Saint John!"

"Still telling me how to do my law-work," the deputy said coldly, and again he faced Burke. "Just what were you fellows looking for the other day on Circle F range?"

"For that which was lost," Burke answered quietly; "we did not find it. Shall we go, Mona Belle?"

"Just a minute, bar-dog!" Saint John growled. "You'll go when I say you can go!"

"There are ladies present," Charley Compton spoke for the first time since making the introductions. "He and Mona Belle will leave if they are so minded!"

THE DEPUTY turned his full gaze upon Compton and raked him savagely with narrowed eyes. "Interferring with an officer in the discharge of his duties?" he asked, coldly.

"What duties?" Ace Fleming cut in. "Burke did nothing; perhaps I'm the man you want. Or say Charley, for instance, or perhaps Tim Kelly; make up your mind, Saint!"

"You stay out of this!" the deputy roared. "You fellers all be at an inquest to be held in the court room in Vaca at three o'clock!"

"We will all be there, and now you've done your law-work," Fleming told the towering Deputy. "We will all be there, won't we, gentlemen?"

Yancey, Kelly and Compton nodded their heads. Sandra turned eagerly to Mona Belle.

"Won't you ride with me to the Circle F?" she invited. "Your Uncle can attend the inquest, and pick you up there, unless you will stay a few days."

"I couldn't leave Major," Mona Belle said hesitantly. "That's my Labrador dog, and the best friend I have."

"That's settled then," Fleming said to Saint John. "So perhaps you will want to ride on ahead and get thing ready, you being the head-man."

"Don't tell me what to do," Saint John blustered.

"You stop telling every one else what to do," Fleming said sharply. "You work for us, the tax-payers; we pay your wages."

Saint John glared and then whirled his big horse. "You men be there at three o'clock sharp!" he admonished, and galloped up the road toward Vaca.

"Shorty will ride back with you and Mona Belle," Fleming told his wife. "This inquest is a mere routine, and won't take long; everyone is invited for supper, and we will expect you all."

"Thank you heartily, Fleming," Stingaree Burke said with a warm smile. "Mona and I have a day off, but I can't say for Tim Kelly."

"I've got to get back to the *Silver Dollar* after the doings," Kelly excused himself. "But thanks just the same."

"You will love Sugar-Foots," Compton told Mona Belle. "I'm already giving Gospel competition for her affections."

"We better start back to the Circle F," Sandra suggested. "Woo Fong will want plenty of time to prepare a special feast, and he will be glad to get rid of Deloise. He looks after her as if she were his grand-daughter."

"You tell Woo Fong I'm jealous," Cummings said, with a twinkle in his brown eyes. "We will see you at supper then."

THE TWO women rode away with Shorty Benson. Cummings invited the men into his cabin where they took seats on the bunks. Ace Fleming and Stingaree Burke were studying each other in that manner only seasoned gamblers can effect—seeing everything, and not seeming to look.

"We've several things in common, Burke," Fleming said quietly.

"Gambling," Burke answered promptly; "name another."

"I could name two, but I won't," Fleming answered with a smile.

"Seems as though we both like and respect Charley Compton," Burke said with an answering smile.

"You embarrass me, but thanks just the same," Compton said gratefully. "What's there to these inquests?"

"Routine," Fleming said with a shrug. "No complaints have been signed; the jury will bring in verdicts of justifiable homicide for the record."

"If you have a spare, break it out, and I will replace it, Gospel," Fleming spoke to Cummings. "These inquests are dry business at best."

Cummings produced a new bottle and handed it to Stingaree Burke, who took a folding cork-screw from a vest pocket. Burke pulled the cork and handed the bottle to Fleming. "To the confusion of our enemies, if we have any," he said quietly.

"I'll drink to that," Fleming answered, and drank sparingly from the bottle.

It went the rounds, with Cummings and Compton abstaining.

"I'll saddle old Fred for the ride in," Cummings said, and excused himself.

"He does not drink in company?" Burke asked softly.

"I believe it shames him," Fleming explained. "Gospel is the best friend I have."

"A fine man; a mighty fine man," Burke agreed heartily. "I've heard a great deal about him. Quiet and unassuming, but entirely dependable when trouble rouses its ugly head."

He took another drink, and the bottle made another round. Cummings led his hip-shot sorrel to the rack and made a slip knot in the bridle-reins.

"We'd best be riding to Vaca," Fleming suggested. "Old Tom Carr is the Justice, and a sensible man; he won't stand for any usurpation of authority in his court from the Saint."

They left the cabin and walked out to untie and mount their horses. There was no hurry, and they arrived in Vaca at a leisurely walk.

Judge Carr also ran the General Store; now he was in his chambers behind the courtroom. He came out as the men entered, and they all rose to their feet until he had seated himself behind the bench. John Saint John read off the names of the deceased, stated the facts, and suggested that each case be tried separately.

"Nonsense," Carr said testily. "All these hombres were outside the law, and I believe they all shot first. Gentlemen, what is your verdict—or do you want to arrive at same in private?"

"I've been elected foreman, Your Honor," an old cattleman spoke up, as he arose to his feet. "My name is Cal Brighton, of the Box B. We the jury, find that the deceased came to their deaths of gunshot wounds, after deliberate provocation. On all and each of them, we render a verdict of justifiable homicide!"

"Gentlemen of the jury, I thank you in the name of the Court and for the County and State," Judge Carr said gravely. "The four deceased were outlaws; the defendants, if any, are acquitted. Court is dismissed!"

JOHN SAINT JOHN appeared disappointed; he had lost another opportunity to exercise his authority. Gospel Cummings shook hands with Cal Brighton, and introduced Compton and Burke.

"I've been missing a few cattle lately Gospel," the old cowman complained irritably. "But then, there are two sets of owlhooters holing up in the lavas, and I reckon they have to eat." He glanced at the big deputy, and Saint John went on the defensive at once.

"I'll ride out to your place and deputize some of your hands for a hunt," the deputy suggested, eagerly.

"You won't," Brighton contradicted. "My boys all know you, and they won't take your domineering orders. When we think the time is right, we'll ride on our own!"

"You can't take the law into your own hands," Saint John argued loudly.

"You heard the verdict this afternoon," Brighton reminded. "It looks like we can, and you know damn well that we will!"

"We better get started for the Circle F," Charley Compton suggested. "It's quite a piece over the hill, and Woo Fong will have supper ready."

They left the courtroom, mounted their horses, and rode out of town. Saint John waved a hand and turned in at the jail. They arrived at the Circle F nearly two hours later, and Ace Fleming straightened in his saddle when a racing horse came out of the big yard in a dead run. Shorty Benson slid his horse to a stop and went straight to Fleming.

"Don't go fighting your head, Boss," he pleaded; "they got Sugar-Foots!"

Fleming listened, and his face turned pale. He raced up to the house, flung himself from the saddle, and ran into the big front room. Woo Fong was lying on a cowskin couch, and Sandra was bathing the aged man's head. Woo Fong saw Fleming and sat up weakly.

"Who got Deloise?" Fleming demanded harshly.

Sandra held back her tears as she arose to her feet. "Woo never saw the man who struck him on the head with a gun," she said quietly. "Deloise was playing in the kitchen; she was gone when Woo regained consciousness!"

"Where's Mona Belle?" Stingaree Burke demanded.

"She raced over to Dog Town to get Major, her dog," Sandra said worriedly. "Mona Belle said that Major could follow any scent!"

"Come on, Compton!" Burke said sternly. "You and I will follow in case she needs any help; some of you old hands circle for sign!"

Compton hurried outside with Burke; they mounted and roared toward the east at a dead run. There was no opportunity for talk until they reached Dog Town an hour later, and

saw Mona Belle's horse tied to the picket fence near the alley.

MONA BELLE came out of the house with the big black dog. She had also strapped on a gun-belt. Her pretty face was gravely determined, but she expressed relief when she saw her uncle.

"They took Sandra's little girl." Mona Belle said, quietly; "Major will take the trail if they left one."

She mounted her sweating horse without speaking to Compton. They rode back at a more leisurely pace because of the dog, and it was almost dark when they reached the Circle F. Gospel Cummings met them at the tie-rail with Sandra.

"There were two of them," Cummings stated positively. "We've held the others back so as not to cloud the sign. Let the dog smell those hoofprints, first; Sandra has a dress belonging to Deloise."

"Start working, Mona Belle," Burke told his niece. "Major will have to be mighty smart to untangle this one. The bootprints of those two kidnappers; the scent of the horses; and the smell of the girl."

Mona Belle dismounted and snapped a leash on the retriever's collar. She led him to the rail, pointed out the two sets of hoofprints, and then led him to the kitchen. Woo Fong had recovered enough to look after his cooking. The big dog smelled the aged Chinese, sniffed about the floor, and raised his head. Mona Belle took the dress from Sandra and allowed the dog to sniff eagerly; then she led him back to the tie-rail and again showed him the prints of the two horses.

Shorty Benson had saddled fresh horses; supper was forgotten. The party quit the ranch and followed the dog who was racing ahead with nose to the ground. The dog stopped suddenly and began to circle in confusion. Mona Belle watched him with a puzzled expression on her pretty face until Gospel Cummings rode up and spoke quietly.

"They've given Major a forked trail," he explained. "Keep your horses back so as not to cloud the sign. Here; hold my horse, Skid," and they all watched while Cummings dismounted.

"They separated here," Cummings explained. "One of those owlhooters rode back toward Lost River; the other headed east. Which one do you want the dog to follow?"

"I've got a split idea," Charley Compton said slowly. "It's just a suggestion, but see what you think. Gospel and Ace know that Lost River country inside and out. Skid and Stingaree know Dog Town and that easterly badlands. Put the dog toward the east, and let's split up into two parties."

"That's using your head, Charley," Gospel said. "You better ride wih Burke and Yancey. How about Sandra, Ace?"

'I'll go back to the ranch," Sandra Fleming said in a choked voice. "Please find my baby if you can, Mona Belle!"

"We will find her, Sandra," Mona Belle said confidently; "Charley will let you know as soon as we know!"

THE TWO parties split up immediately, with Shorty Benson complaining because he had to ride back to the Circle F with Sandra. Cummings, Fleming, and Yancey took the west trail leading toward Lost River, while Mona Belle put the dog on the tracks leading east. She rode after the dog, with Burke and Compton following at a short distance.

"These tracks are leading right back to Dog Town," Burke said quietly.

"There are many women in Dog Town; are there any in that hideout back at Lost River?"

"You mean Sugar-Foots will be with one of the women at Dog Town," Compton said. "Better put Major on the leash, Mona Belle."

Mona Belle leashed the dog and started her horse. Major strained at the leash with little whines of eagerness. They entered Dog Town where the dog stopped in front of the long building known as the "*Cribs*."

The two men dismounted and anchored their horses with trailing reins. Burke knocked on the door, and a woman's voice spoke sharply. "Who is it?"

"Stingaree Burke; I want to talk to you, Lilly Mae."

The door opened a crack, and a buxom woman peered out. "I didn't know you cared, Stingaree," she said coldly. "Come back some other night."

"I want my Mommy," a childish voice cried, and Burke pushed into the room.

He was met by the muzzle of a pistol against his breast-bone. "Get out, or I'll lean on the trigger!" the woman threatened.

"Drop that gun, sister," a feminine voice ordered. "Stingaree won't shoot a woman, but with me it's different!"

Charley Compton stepped in the back door and shouldered into the woman with a quick thrust. Lilly Mae was knocked sprawling, but she aimed her gun at Burke. Mona Belle pressed the trigger and wounded the woman in the hand.

Lilly Mae moaned as she nursed her wounded hand. Burke grabbed up the child, ran outside, and waited for Compton and Mona Belle to mount up. Major was barking furiously as Compton took the baby from Burke and rode out of town. Burke emptied his sixshooter over the heads of a crowd of men, and the three rode fast to lose themselves in the night.

Deloise was asleep as they rode into the Circle F yard. "I love her," Compton told Mona Belle.

"She trusts you," the girl said softly.

"I wish *you* did," Compton whispered, and then he dismounted and carried the sleeping child to Sandra Fleming.

"Ace and I will never forget, Charley," Sandra promised.

"You have guests for a while," Compton answered. "Stingaree and Mona Belle cannot return to Dog Town now. How's Woo Fong?"

"Fine, Cholly boy," a voice answered, and the aged Chinese led Compton to the kitchen. "I save supper for you," he said proudly.

He sat steaks before Compton and Burke, and they ate hungrily. "There are lots of things I don't understand," Compton said.

"Save it for later," Burke warned. "The world wasn't made in a day, and part of this puzzle is nearly a hundred years old!"

## 6

ACE FLEMING watched Gospel Cummings as the gaunt plainsman followed a trail that would have been unseen by less-trained eyes. They were deep in the badlands; had crossed a land-bridge where Lost River went underground. A steep trail cut through the dense brush leading to a sawed-tooth ridge, and Cummings called a halt as he turned his horse to face Yancey and Fleming.

"We might as well go back," he said wearily. "The man we are following is part of the Demingway gang, and he's in the cave by now. They could pick us off, one at a time, before we could even see their lookouts."

Ace Fleming rubbed the handles of his twin sixshooters. His daughter was the pride of his life, and, schooled though he was at hiding his emotions, agitation was visible on his handsome face.

"We'll get back here at daylight," Cummings suggested quietly. "I might even be able to get into the cave through the chimney."

"Not any more, Gospel," Fleming argued. "Everyone in the Strip knows about that secret entrance by now; you wouldn't have a chance!"

"Even I know about that way through the chimney," Skid Yancey added. "We'd better wait till daylight, boss. Besides, I have a hunch that Charley and Stingaree will have news for us."

"Quiet," Cummings said tensely. "Somebody coming up the backtrail. Dismount and fan out; we'll jump whoever it is, and ask questions later!"

The faint sounds of a shod horse could be heard coming along the brushy trail from the east. Skid Yancey took down his catch-rope, tied up his horse, and crouched in the trail-side brush. A horse loomed up in the dark, and Yancey made a bullet-cast with his noose.

Yancey hip-leaned against the rope as the startled horse shied to the left. A tall man was jerked from the saddle; as he struck the ground, Ace Fleming leaped on the rider and struck once with his clubbed sixshooter. Gospel Cummings seized the dragging reins and quieted the spooky horse, which he tied to a 'squite root before coming back to his companions.

"Do you know this hombre?" Fleming asked.

Cummings leaned closer and tried to find enough light for a possible identification. "I don't know him personal, but it's a gent by the name of Jack Barson," he stated. "He's one of Demingway's men, and he might have had something to do with the kidnapping. Hobble his hands, and we will take him back to the Circle F."

Yancey took a piggin' string and tied the unconscious man's hands behind his back. They boosted Barson to the saddle of his horse, mounted up, and started back through the brush-choked trails. Again it was Cummings who first heard an alien sound.

"I hear a dog talking," he said slowly. "Must be that Major dog the girl was going to put on the scent."

"Better let me ride ahead a spell," Yancey suggested. "I know Major, and he knows me. Okay, boss?"

"Ride on," Fleming agreed. "If they have hurt Deloise..."

"If they have, I'll side you from here to the frozen shores of hell!" Cummings declared in a husky voice.

Skid Yancey rode at a fast walk, pointing to the faint baying of the dog. Then he gave a high, shrill whistle and cocked his head to listen. Silence for a moment, and then the dog's answer came back to him, down the wind. Two minutes later Major ran up to Yancey's horse. Yancey dismounted and petted the big black dog as he talked soothingly. He knew that Stingaree Burke would be with Major, and had as sensitive hearing as Gospel Cummings.

When he heard the clop of hooves, Yancey called softly. "Up the trail, Stingaree. Yancey talking."

Stingaree Burke rode up the trail, closely followed by Charley Compton. Gospel Cummings and Ace Fleming arrived at the same time from the west, and their prisoner was just rousing around.

"Stand back, Stingaree," Yancey warned. "We caught us a prisoner, and look at Major going for him!"

THE RETRIEVER had smelled the ground, raced up to Barson's horse, and was jumping at the stirrup. Burke took a leash and fastened it to the dog's collar. Charley Compton spoke hurriedly to Fleming.

"We found Deloise, boss. We brought her home, and she isn't hurt a bit!"

"Thank Gawd," Fleming said gratefully.

"Amen," Gospel Cummings added, reverently.

"Down, Major," Burke commanded the excited dog. He turned to Fleming. "This hombre was one of the pair who took the girl. What is your pleasure, Fleming?"

"We will take him back to the Circle F until I decide," Fleming answered. "I can't think right now, and if you gents don't mind, I'll ride on ahead to see Deloise and Sandra."

"You do that, and we'll take it slow," Cummings seconded the suggestion. "And tell Woo Fong to heat up the grub."

"You say this owlhooter's name is Barson?" Compton asked slowly.

"Wait till the boss comes up on you, Compton!" the prisoner growled savagely.

"You know him?" Gospel asked curiously.

"I've met him a time or two," Compton answered.

"Put a gun in my hand and tie me loose, is all I ask," Barson begged his captors. "That yearling gunhawk never saw the day he could match me with a sixshooter!"

"I matched you one time," Compton said coldly. "I should have killed you that time, but I threw off my shot!"

"You damned lawdog!" Barson swore hoarsely. "But you ain't a Texas Ranger no more!"

"Let's ride," Stingaree Burke said shortly. "If this whining snake wants to talk a lot, he can do it back on the Circle F. If he don't give it back on the talk with a straight tongue, there's ways to persuade his kind!"

Charley Compton rode ahead with Burke, while Cummings paired with Yancey who was leading the prisoner's horse. They rode into the Circle F yard under the light of a young moon, and Yancey helped the prisoner dismount. Shorty Benson and Tom Brady took the horses to the barn. As the party walked across the wide front porch, Ace Fleming opened the big door. He held Deloise in his arms, and she held out her arms to Cummings.

"You didn't come to see Sugar-Foots," the child complained.

Cummings took the girl and held her very close for a long moment. His lips seemed to be moving as though in silent prayer.

"I came when I could, little sweetheart," he told the child. "I have been very busy, but I love you almost twice as much as I did the last time."

He kissed the child on the cheek, and Deloise giggled. "Your whiskers tickle," she complained. "But I like it, Uncle Gospel."

Cummings handed the child to Sandra Fleming as Compton came into the room with Barson. The baby stared at Barson and started to tremble.

"He took me away!" she wailed. "He was with an ugly little man!"

"Did the ugly man hold his mouth like this?" Compton asked, and he drew up his mouth as though it were pulled by a scar.

Oh, Charley, you look just like him," Deloise exclaimed. "His name was...was...?"

"Cuchillo?" Compton prompted.

"Yes, Cuchillo," the little girl answered with a shudder.

"That means *knife*," Burke explained. "Cuchillo Lopez is a outlaw wanted on both sides of the border!"

"Better put Deloise to bed, Sandra," Ace Fleming told his pretty wife. "We want to have a talk with Barson; please don't disturb us."

"Supper is ready," a voice announced, and Woo Fong stood in the doorway to the kitchen, grinning at Gospel Cummings.

"In ten minutes, Woo," Cummings

told the aged Chinese. "This is the man who slapped you to sleep, but Ace did the same for him. Does that make you feel better?"

"Much better," Woo answered with grin. "He got plenty big headache, you betcha!"

AS WOO returned to the kitchen, Ace Fleming walked up to the sullen prisoner. "Now you start talking, Barson," he said quietly. "And you tell it straight, or I'll work you over myself!"

Barson glanced down at the small ure!" Barson gasped, as the sweat in his boots; Barson was a full twelve inches taller.

"You and who else?" he sneered.

Fleming stepped forward quickly. His hands flashed up and closed around the big outlaw's biceps. Then Fleming exerted his strength; Barson gasped and then screamed. "Take him off, or tie me loose!"

Ace Fleming continued his pressure. His thumbs depressed the brachial points in the big man's arms, and Barson began to moan softly.

"Talk!" Fleming said sternly. "Or you will never use your arms again."

"Cord Demingway is after the treasure!" Barson gasped, as the sweat dripped from his rocky chin. 'Swifty Matthews is after it, and so is Stingaree Burke!".

Fleming lessened the pressure a trifle. "What treasure?" he asked quietly.

"The Vallejo treasure!" Barson whimpered. "Leave me loose; my arms are killing me!"

Ace Fleming released his hold and stepped back. He watched the prisoner's face, and turned to Stingaree Burke.

"You want to say anything, Burke?" he asked.

"It was just a gambler's chance, and I took it," Burke answered, tight-lipped. "I'm riding back to Dog Town to see Cuchillo Lopez!"

"I'll ride with you," Skid Yancey said eagerly. "I want to see Lilly Mae, and the hombre who sucked her into this deal!"

"You stay here, Skid," Fleming said quietly. "You'd just ride into a trap, and you're a sucker for the kind of bait Pug Jones uses!"

Fleming watched the face of Stingaree Burke as he spoke. Burke frowned and turned slowly. "Are you guessing?" he asked the little gambler.

"Ask Barson," Fleming suggested. "Perhaps he wants to talk some more, now that he can use his arms again."

"Pug will kill you for this, Burke," Barson said, spitefully; "he's got a piece of that treasure!"

"Which piece?" Fleming asked. "Demingway, or Matthews?"

Jack Barson raised his head with a startled gleam in his greenish eyes. "Say!" he ejaculated. "I never thought of that!"

"Did you think of it, Burke?" Fleming asked carelessly.

Stingaree Burke poured tobacco flakes in a brown-paper trough. His hands were steady, but his face was troubled. "I hadn't thought of it—not after what happened to Tom Jenkins," he said thoughtfully. "Jenkins was one of Pug's men; he was killed by the Demingway crowd the morning we rode out to Lost River!"

"He was a dirty double-crosser," Barson said; "Jenkins was one of Swifty Matthews men!"

"Looks like Pug Jones is working both ends against the middle," Fleming guessed shrewdly. He glanced at Charley Compton who was listening silently.

"Where do you fit into this puzzle, Charley?" Fleming asked.

"Was a time I worked for Stingaree," Compton answered without hesitation.

"You a lawman?" Fleming asked.

Stingaree Burke shook his white head. "I was raising cattle," he answered; "Charley was my foreman."

"I remember a brand called the

Box V," Gospel Cummings interrupted. "It was registered to the old Vallejo Rancho down near Laredo."

"It still is," Burke said coldly.

"You eat now?" Woo asked from the doorway to the kitchen. "Alla time talkee, talkee. Grub get plenty cold. Come and get it!"

"I've eaten," Compton said shortly. "I'll keep a gun on Barson while he stokes his innards."

"I'll watch Barson," Burke corrected; "someone wants to talk to you out on the porch. *Vamos!*"

CHARLEY COMPTON stared and then hurried to the front door. There was a swing in the shadows over in a far corner of the long verandah, and Compton walked slowly over when he heard the swing creak slightly.

"Mona Belle?" he called in a whisper.

"Charley; please come and sit down."

Compton crossed the porch, trying to slow his pace. He took a seat in the swing at the far end from the girl. He waited for her to speak.

"I heard what Barson said," the girl spoke in a subdued whisper. "What does it all mean, Charley?"

"I don't want to quarrel," Compton answered gruffly; "that's what came between us down in Texas."

"But this is not Texas," Mona Belle said patiently. "Perhaps I was wrong, but I am also confused."

"You think you are confused?" Compton said bitterly.

"Please come closer; we might be overheard," the girl suggested.

Charley Compton grunted, but he moved close to the girl. "Please don't be angry," Mona Belle pleaded. "If I was wrong, I want to know—so I can correct any mistakes I made."

"You made one," Compton said, almost savagely. "By trusting Swifty Matthews!"

"Mr. Matthews is a fine man," the girl defended. "You and he used to be very good friends, when you were both Texas Rangers!"

"That was before he went bad and joined the Wild Bunch," Compton argued; "I got the word that he was gunning for me!"

"Is that why you followed him up here?" the girl asked.

"Partly; you know the rest of it!"

"The treasure," Mona Belle whispered softly. "I wonder if there really was a treasure?"

"There *was* one," Compton said gruffly. "Whether it still exists is the question."

"You were with Uncle Jose Morales when he died," the girl said slowly. "He would talk to no one but you; what did he tell you, Charley?"

"Just what he told you and Stingaree," Compton answered sullenly. "That there was a big treasure in gold bullion and jewels."

"But the title to the ranch is in question," Mona Belle said, worriedly. "Uncle Burke was a lawyer; he knows about such things."

"Damn the treasure!" Compton burst out. "There's something else more valuable!"

"If I lose the ranch, I've lost everything," the girl said hopelessly.

"Everything?" Compton repeated.

"Everything except you and Uncle Burke—and the friendship of Malden Matthews," the girl said listlessly.

"I don't even like his name," Compton growled. "Swifty fits him better than Malden, the no-good owlhooter!"

"You can't talk that way about my friends," Mona Belle answered heatedly; "you have no proof that he is an outlaw!"

"He's hip-deep with Pug Jones over at Dog Town," Compton argued. "And you know about Jones!"

The girl shuddered. "Yes, I know about Pug Jones," she admitted. "Chopin made it easier for me to sing in the *Red Rose;* he's the piano player. I'm afraid of Jones, and he does not like you since you argued with him."

"I argued with him once," Compton said curtly. "I'd want a gun in my hand the next time I had words with that gorilla."

"He is like a great ape, and just as powerful," Mona Belle agreed with a little shudder.

"You won't go back there to sing any more," Compton stated positively.

"I might," Mona Belle said quickly, "if it would help Uncle Burke get any information."

"You stay away from there," Compton said roughly.

"Don't you give me orders, Charley Compton!"

"I'm sorry," Compton said at once, and then he quickly seized the girl in his arms. "Don't do these things to me, Mona," he whispered huskily. "I love you too much, and I'd kill the man who hurt you!"

"Release me, Charley," Mona Belle said coldly. "I don't like to be manhandled by any one!"

Charley Compton dropped his arms, and rose quickly to his feet. He left the startled girl and stomped across the porch with his spurs dragging. He almost bumped into Skid Yancey, who was leaving the front room.

"C'mon," Yancey said guardedly. "I'm riding to Dog Town, and I'd be proud to have you guard my back!"

*"Sta Bueno,"* Compton agreed without hesitation. "I could work off a head of steam myself!"

THEY HEADED for the big barn where some saddle-stock was held for emergencies. They found their saddles on the accustomed pegs, led out a pair of fresh horses, and were saddling up when a voice spoke inquiringly.

"You gents riding off someplace?"

"Gospel!" Compton muttered. "What in time you doing back here in the dark?"

"Minding my own business," Cummings answered gruffly, but he wiped his silky brown beard with one lean hand. "You two heading for Dog Town?"

"Is that minding your own business?" Yancey demanded.

"Lay your hackles, cowboy," Cummings said sternly. "I was thinking some of riding yonderly myself."

"Surprise!" Yancey said acidly. "Call out the troops; we need a lot of help!"

"You get smart with me, I'll take you apart with my hands," Cummings threatened. "You'll need all the help you can get, and you both know it."

"You can't go," Yancey said nastily. "You've got to bend the lead to Lost River in the early morning."

"I'll be back before the early morning," Cummings said, and threw his saddle on a Circle F horse. "I might need your help then, so I'll help you now."

"Look, Gospel," Compton said soothingly. "You ain't as young as you used to be by at least twenty years; you need your sleep."

"A cowboy can make up his sleep come winter," Cummings remarked dryly, and went on saddling. "Who is it—Pug Jones, or Cuchillo Lopez?"

"The old son is a mind-reader," Yancey remarked to Compton. "I'm looking up this knife-throwing son," he admitted grudgingly.

"Don't under-rate Lopez," Compton warned. "He does not know the meaning of fear, and he can shoot mighty straight."

"He forced Lilly Mae to do what she did," Yancey argued. "I likewise want to see Lilly Mae!"

"Bull frog!" Cummings said dryly. "Lilly Mae is a gold-digger, and every one knows it."

Compton listened intently. It was not like Gospel Cummings to speak disparingly of any woman, and the old plainsman must have a good reason. Yancey rose to the bait with a snarl.

"She was forced into it," he said. "This Lopez got to her one night when she was drunk, and he paid her fine. He took her to a clip-joint in Juarez, but she escaped from there and came up here!"

"Poor girl," Cummings said sympathetically. "Judge not, lest ye be also judged. Your motives are commendable, Yancey; when is the wedding?"

"What wedding?" Yancey demanded.

"Yours and Lilly Mae's," Cummings answered, innocently. "She won't have anyplace to go, so she will naturally go with her protector."

SKID REMAINED silent in the darkness of the barn as he fiddled with his latigo-strap. "You might have a point there, oldtimer," he admitted finally. "I didn't aim none to marry Lilly Mae. She's a nice gal and all that, but not the type a gent would pick for a life sentence in double-harness."

"How about you, Charley?" Cummings asked.

"What about me?"

"What's taking you back to Dog Town at this time of a night?"

"Cuchillo Lopez," Compton answered without hesitation.

"Something to do with the Vallejo Rancho?" Cummings asked quietly.

"That's right."

"Mebbe we better take Ace along," Cumming suggested. "He's mixed up in this up to his hips—even if he does not understand all he knows about it!"

"How do you figure?" Yancey asked.

"Didn't they kidnap Sugar-Foots? And Lost River Cave is on Circle F range."

"Just hold it a minute," a voice spoke from outside the barn entrance. "Gospel is right, and I'll ride in with you. Now hold the talk till we quit the ranch; everyone is overhearing

everyone else tonight."

Charley Compton felt his pulses quicken at Fleming's words; he wondered if he had been overheard talking with Mona Belle. "Seems like we are all here except Stingaree Burke," he said lamely.

"How wrong can one gent be," a voice asked sarcastically, and Burke entered the barn and took down his saddle. "I'd like a few words with Cuchillo Lopez myself!"

Compton turned and leaned weakly

against Skid Yancey. "You and your big mouth," he accused bitterly.

"What about Malden Matthews?" Yancey snarled his answer.

Compton froze in the darkness of the barn. So Yancey had heard part of his talk with Mona Belle; and he had heard Jack Barson tell about Demingway's plans.

"Us and our big mouths," Compton corrected himself, and he felt better when Yancey dug him in the ribs.

"What you reckon the boss and old Gospel have on their minds?" Yancey whispered, with his mouth close to Compton's ear.

"Cuchillo Lopez," Compton answered dryly; "let's go along for the ride."

"And perhaps earn your fighting pay," Ace Fleming said crisply. "If there is treasure on Circle F range, I want to know more about it. And I want to see this Lopez hombre the worst way!"

"The worst?" Cummings repeated.

"You heard me," Fleming answered brusquely. "And don't start quoting me any more Proverbs!"

"Dead men won't tell you much," Cummings said heavily; "use your better judgement, Ace."

"Boots and saddles," Fleming answered, as he mounted one of his thoroughbreds. "What time does the *Red Rose* close?" he asked Burke.

"About two in the morning," Burke answered. "I ought to warn you, Fleming. Pug Jones has a dozen gunhands on his payroll, all hardcases."

"There five of us," Fleming said shortly. "That's enough!"

"What if Swifty Matthews is there?" Yancey asked.

"He won't be there," Burke answered quickly.

"How do you know?" Yancey persisted.

"He's an outlaw, and smart," Burke answered. "After what happened today, Matthews will keep clear of Dog Town!"

THEY LEFT the Circle F at a quiet walk, remaining silent until they were well away from the big yard. Then Gospel Cummings spoke for his companions. "What's your plan, Ace?"

"Thanks, Gospel," Fleming voiced his gratitude for the plainsman's understanding. "I want a talk with Pug Jones, and I figure that Lopez will be there. Now we know there is a connection between Pug Jones and Cord Demingway; and it also seems that Jones is stringing along with this Swifty Matthews. I'm using the excuse of my daughter's kidnapping, but I admit to you men that it is only an excuse. I'll settle for that personally when the time is right!"

"So we'll stop first at the *Red Rose,*" Cummings said quietly. "Don't forget we were going to Lost River in the early morning."

"So we might have some information before we go there," Fleming answered harshly. "Those two kidnappers split up, and they went two ways. Perhaps Pug Jones can tell us why!"

Charley Compton nudged Skid Yancey gently. Both were under the domination of Fleming's magnetism; the gambler was making plans—where they had intended to barge in looking for trouble just to work off their separate angers.

"You stay with the bunch, Skid," Fleming told Yancey. "Don't go bolting off alone to see about Lilly Mae!"

"I'll be damned!" Yancey muttered. "Like you said, boss," he answered Fleming.

"And you, Charley," Fleming continued sternly. "Leave Lopez to me!"

"I can take orders," Compton answered stiffly.

"How about me, Ace?" Burke asked in a jocular manner.

"Don't you go chousing off to your house to pick up a few things," Fleming said with a smile. "If there is time afterward, we will stop there and help you; but stick with the bunch."

"Damn good sense, Ace," Burke admitted.

"They won't be expecting us tonight," Fleming said confidently. "Not after what happened tonight up at Lilly Mae's place. Yonder's the lights of Dog Town, so let's ride in quietly."

They approached the saloon riding two abreast, with Ace Fleming in the lead. He stopped his horse abruptly, and the other four reined in quickly.

"Look there at the tie-rail," Fleming whispered. "That's Saint John's horse, and that big law-dog just might need some help!"

"To hell with him," Skid Yancey said bluntly. "That big jasper is all paw-and-beller, and he tells it scarey. Let him help himself!"

Suddenly men began to yell inside the saloon. The five riders dismounted and tied up at the rack. Then they were running toward the saloon where the bull-like voice of John Saint John was yelling for order.

"I'm the law here in the Strip!" the big deputy shouted. "I'm taking Lopez back to Vaca if I have to fight every gun-hung hombre in this sink of sin!"

"Hold it!" Fleming said quietly, and he stopped to peer under the slatted, swinging doors.

Saint John had his back to the door, and his gun covered a small Mexican with a twisted mouth. A big man stepped up behind Saint John and clubbed with his gun; the deputy went down under the blow like a pole-axed steer.

Men swarmed toward the fallen lawman, but Ace Fleming slipped under the door with a sixshooter in each small hand. "Stand away from the law!" the little gambler ordered sternly.

The doors opened silently, and Stingaree Burke stepped in, followed by Cummings, Compton, and Yancey.

"That's Pug Jones there by the bar, boss," Skid Yancey said loudly. "Get him told!"

## 7

ACE FLEMING faced the threatening crowd, backed up by his four seasoned companions. Percentage girls gaped from the sidelines, with most of their upper bodies bared to the vulgar gaze. Tough gunmen stood frozen where the surprise had caught them, watching and waiting for an opportunity to earn their fighting pay.

Fleming spoke softly to Cuchillo Lopez. "You were to the Circle F this afternoon, Senor Lopez?"

Lopez gasped, and then straightened up. "Prove it!" he said brazenly. "I don't know you, Senor!"

"The name is Ace Fleming, father of the little girl you kidnapped. You Senor, are a sneaking, cowardly dog!"

"Don't you come barging into my place with a cutter in each hand, and telling someone else he is a coward!" Pug Jones interrupted harshly.

Ace moved his smooth white hands. The two sixshooters disappeared in his holsters. He said quietly to Lopez: "You are the son of one she-dog!"

Cuchillo Lopez slapped for the sheath at the back of his neck; his hand came out of his shirt-collar, clutching a balanced throwing-knife. Ace Fleming struck for his right holster; pale flame winked out under the garish yellow lights of the hanging coal-oil lamps, as the long-barreled sixshooter exploded in the gambler's hand.

Lopez was jerked around to the right as the speeding slug hit his hand, and sent the knife spinning toward a side wall. Lopez stomped his boot to stop his turn. His left hand went down to his holster; his sixshooter was just clearing leather when Fleming squeezed off a slow shot. Lopez

screamed with pain; he was like a hawk with both pinnons broken and bleeding.

The big man who had clubbed Saint John now made a bravo move for his holster. Gospel Cummings shot one time and sent a slug through the gunhawk's right wrist.

"Any one else buying in?" Fleming asked softly. "How about you, Pug?"

"I never play the other man's game," Jones answered sullenly. "When I'm dealing, things will be different!"

"Do you know a gunhand by the name of Jack Barson?" Fleming asked the saloon-man.

"I know him; works for Cord Demingway."

"We caught him," Ace said sternly. "He was the other hombre who took my little girl. Barson talked with his mouth wide open; he told us a few things about you."

"Yeah; what you aim to do about it?" Jones asked slowly.

"You've seen me work one time," Fleming warned. "That's what I'll always do about it!"

Pug Jones turned his attention to Stingaree Burke. "You're fired, Burke!" he said loudly. "I used the money you had coming to pay Lilly Mae's doctor bill!"

"And a mighty good use for it," Burke answered evenly. "They say dirty money gets clean when it changes hands one time."

Saint John moaned and rolled up to a sitting position. He shook his head to clear away the cobwebs of fog, and then he leaped to his feet. "You're under arrest, Pug Jones!" he shouted. "For resisting arrest, and assaulting an officer!"

"Back up and take a fresh start, Saint," Fleming said quietly.

The deputy whirled and saw the five from Vaca town. His jaw dropped with surprise, and then he rubbed a swelling on his shaggy head. "What are you men doing here?"

"Saving your life," Gospel Cummings said brusquely. "Yonder is your prisoner; he's one of the hombres who kidnapped Fleming's little girl!"

"Senor, some day I will kill you for what you do to me, Cuchillo Lopez," the outlaw promised Fleming grimly; he had now controlled his emotions against the pain of his shattered hands. "Me, I am not afraid to die," Lopez continued. "But to cripple a man for life... I will remember, Senor Fleming!"

"I never give a killer but one chance," Fleming said coldly. "Remember that, too."

"That's enough of your *habla,*" Saint John said loudly. "Who hit me?" he asked Fleming.

"That big tough hombre who tried to beat Gospel to the shot," Fleming answered. "You've got him dead to rights for assaulting the law; five of us saw the attack on you."

SAINT JOHN turned his attention to Pug Jones. "I'm warning you now, Jones," he said, and his big voice was muted and low. "I mean to close you up and burn Dog Town to the ground; I'll do it the next time you get out of line!"

"Try it," Jones answered defiantly. "You make a pretty big target, and you won't live long after you strike the first match!"

Fleming took over to give orders. "You men get out and mount up. Compton and I will stay here to cover this outfit until you ride up. Then you keep them covered while we get outside. And if any of you gents want to turn hero, we won't throw off our shots next time!"

"When you ride off, don't come back," Pug Jones warned. "My men will shoot to kill the first one of you law-hounds that comes looking for trouble!"

Ace Fleming stiffened as he stared at the ugly, twisted face of the Dog Town boss. "There ain't room enough here in the Strip for both of us, Jones," he said slowly, but his deep voice was vibrating with anger. "Thanks for the warning, and that goes both ways; we will also shoot on sight!"

Gospel Cummings called from the street. He sat his saddle, looking over the tops of the swinging doors. Skid Yancey flanked him on one side, with Stingaree Burke on the other. "We're ready to ride, Ace. We'll keep 'em covered!"

Fleming and Compton backed out and mounted their horses. Then the party reined their mounts, and made a quick turn around a corner. They rode at a trot to an alley with Burke leading the way. A low whistle came from Burke's little white house.

"Take it easy, Stingaree; Tim Kelly speaking."

Burke swung down and stepped into the shadows. "Howdy, Tim," he greeted the bar-keep from the *Silver Dollar*. "You better ride out with us."

"Figured on doing it," Kelly answered with a chuckle. "I came over here and packed up most of the stuff belonging to you and Mona Belle. Got a pack-mare out back, and we can carry the rest of the gear!"

Coats and dresses were tied behind cantles, and the party moved on out of Dog Town. Tim Kelly rode a right-swing, with his rifle across his knees; after watching him for a time, Skid Yancey spoke softly to Compton.

"I never drank in the *Silver Dollar*, but if Kelly is a bar-dog, I'm a Mexican hairless. He rides like a cowboy, and he looks like the law to me!"

CHARLEY grunted; he had not spoken all during the fight in the *Red Rose*. The party reached the Circle F just before midnight, and it was Gospel Cummings who gave the orders for the coming day. "We're hitting out for Lost River come daybreak, cowhands. It won't take long to spend the night here on the Circle F; so you better hit your soogans, and get what shut-eye you can."

"I'll bed down in the bunkhouse, if you don't mind," Saint John said to Fleming. "Then I'll be on hand to direct the law-work against that nest of outlaws in the morning."

Ace Fleming frowned. He looked at Cummings, who was watching the deputy's face with an expression of resentment. Gospel shook his head slightly, and the Circle F owner took his cue from that slight token of disapproval.

"You're welcome to sleep here, Saint," Fleming agreed. "But we will take day orders from Gospel when we ride back to Lost River."

"You'll do it like I say," the big deputy stated flatly. "I'll swear in every man as a special deputy, and they will take their orders from me!"

"I won't," Compton spoke up quickly.

"Likewise," Yancey added.

"Make it three of a kind," Gospel put in his bit. "I'm just thankful the Saint didn't get shot up tonight. The last time he got a pindlin scratch in a ruckus, he camped down on me

for two weeks, and it seemed like a year. Get me this, and do that, the live-long day."

"Begrudge a man a bite of food," Saint John said angrily. "Just because he got hurt protecting you rannies and your property."

"Was you protecting us tonight over at Dog Town?" Fleming asked pointedly; "you'd have been kicked to death if we hadn't arrived when we did!"

Saint John shuddered. "My thanks, Fleming," he offered stiffly. "I rode over there to arrest Cuchillo Lopez for kidnapping Deloise."

"So did we," Fleming said bluntly. "So you better ride in with your prisoners, and get Lopez to the doctor."

Gospel Cummings sighed. "I'll ride down as far as Three Points with you," he told the deputy. "Just in case Demingway got word and figures on a rescue. Excuse me for a minute."

He left the group at the tie-rack, stepped deep into the shadows, and reached into the right tail of his coat. He drank deeply from the quart bottle, replaced it with a sigh, and rejoined the group. Compton spoke hesitantly.

"I better ride along with Gospel," he suggested. "I can use that extra bunk in his cabin, and ride over here early for breakfast, if you say the word, boss."

"Thanks, Charley," Fleming said gratefully. "You fellows better be getting along; the rest of you turn in."

Stingaree Burke had unpacked the mare, and had piled his belongings near the swing on the front porch. He joined the men at the barn who were stripping their saddle-gear, and they heard Saint John ride down the trail with his prisoners and escort.

Gospel Cummings rode in moody silence, and Compton had nothing to say. Cuchillo Lopez moaned once in a while; his wounds had stiffened during the ride from Dog Town. The other prisoner was handcuffed to his saddlehorn by his left wrist; he cradled his wounded hand against his chest.

When they reached Three Points, Saint John's tone was conciliatory as he spoke to Compton. "You were a lawman one time, Compton. Mind riding into Vaca with me until I herd these hombres to the doctor's place?"

"Putting it that away, I can't refuse," Compton agreed grudgingly. "I'll be back as soon as I can, Gospel," he said to Cummings.

Saint John took the lead with his prisoners, and Compton brought up the drag where he could watch both men. They arrived at Vaca without incident, and Compton waited at the picket fence which surrounded Doctor Benson's neat cottage. The deputy knocked loudly on the front door, and a little man opened it and answered gruffly.

"Yeah, who is it at this time of a night?"

"The law speaking, Doc," Saint John answered importantly. "Couple of prisoners with gunshot wounds."

"I'll see you later, Saint," Compton called from the road, and turning his horse, he rode back the way he had come.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS was seated on the edge of his bunk when Compton rode up the cabin. The gaunt plainsman was reading from his worn Bible; he replaced a bottle of whiskey under his bunk as he called to Compton.

"Turn your bronc in with old Fred and let's get some sleep."

Compton rode to the little barn and stripped his gear. He hung his saddle on a peg, turned the skirts to catch the air, tied his horse in an empty stall, and hurried to the house.

"Take that bunk yonder," Cummings said. "It's one o'clock now, and we'll be quitting here about four. Blow out the light when you shuck your boots; I'm turning in."

Compton pulled his boots off on a jack which stood near the door. He

blew down the chimney of the coal-oil lamp, hung his hat on a nail, and stripped down to his underwear. He was asleep almost instantly. It seemed to him that he had just closed his eyes when a hand shook him roughly by a shoulder.

"Rise and shine, cowboy," Cummings said gruffly. "I've got a pot of Arbuckle boiling to give us strength for the road."

"Like you said, Gospel," Compton complained, "it didn't take long to spend the night here."

Cummings had lighted the lamp, and a fire was going in the old iron stove. The fragrant aroma of coffee filled the little cabin as the two men washed in a granite basin. Gospel poured two huge mugs of steaming coffee, and Compton rolled a cigarette.

"Swifty Matthews," Cummings began abruptly. "One time he was a Texas Ranger, the same as you. How came him to go wrong and join up with the wild bunch?"

"It was his own idea," Compton answered reluctantly. "He and I were members of Company B at the same time. A braver man never drew breath; I'll give him that much. I reckon he wasn't making money fast enough."

"He don't look like an outlaw to me," Cummings said slowly.

Compton glanced up from his coffee. "You know him?"

"I've seen him," Compton answered. "He still looks like a lawman; for that matter, so do you!"

"Nah uh," Compton said carelessly. "Saint John looks like a lawman. This is mighty good coffee."

"I hope he oversleeps this morning," Cummings said hopefully. "Let's get out there and saddle the horses."

The first fingers of dawn were showing against the eastern sky as the two men entered the little barn. Charley Compton stopped suddenly. He stared at his saddle which was hanging from a peg near the door. Cummings followed his gaze and spoke worriedly. "We had visitors while we slept. What was you carrying under your saddle-skirts?"

Compton stepped up to his saddle and fingered the leather. Someone had used a sharp knife to cut the stitching, and Compton swore under his breath. "It was a map."

"To the Vallejo treasure?" Gospel asked.

COMPTON nodded his head. "I got it from old Jose Morales, who was kin to Don Alvarado Vallejo," he explained. "He gave it to me just before he died, and that's what brought me up here to the Strip!"

"I'm hungry," Cummings said with a shrug. "Let's gear our broncs and get over to the Circle F; we can talk some as we ride. I'm sorry about the map."

"Don't cry about it," Compton said with a mirthless smile. "It won't do Cord Demingway much good. I changed it some; I've got the real map in my head."

"So you better stay healthy," Cummings said.

They saddled their horses and rode up the trail in the very early dawn. Just before they reached the Circle F, Compton spoke quietly. "I'd rather you didn't say anything about the map, Gospel."

"Like you say, Charley, but someone is bound to see that torn saddle-skirt."

"The brush is thick in these parts," Compton suggested. "I caught it in the buck-thorn, and I'll borrow a needle and some waxed thread."

Shorty Benson met them at the Circle F barn and said he would change their gear to fresh horses. "I've had my breakfast; you better be getting yours," he suggested. "How'd you tear that saddle-skirt?"

"Caught it in the buck-thorn, I reckon," Compton answered carelessly. "I'll fix it later."

They hurried to the big kitchen where the rest of the men were just

finishing breakfast. Woo Fong had two places ready, and Compton and Gospel started their breakfast. Ace Fleming was dressed for the trails, and he asked a simple question. "Saint get to Vaca alright with the prisoners?"

Charley nodded. "I think he had to help the Doc," he said. "So, like as not we will have to get along this morning without the law."

"Every man packs a rifle today," Fleming said gruffly. "What's this about Demingway panning gold on Circle F range?" He stared at Gospel Cummings.

"There always has been a trace of metal back there near Lost River," Cummings said carelessly. "You knew it, Ace."

"We've never pampered outlaws here in the Strip," Fleming said sharply; "we won't start now."

Cummings counted noses and spoke briefly. "Seven of us," he commented. "Yancey and Kelly ride with Ace Fleming; Shorty Benson will ride rear guard and hold the horses if we go afoot. Let's head back for the lavas."

The men mounted their horses and left the Circle F. An hour and six miles later, they came to the brawling stream known as Lost River. Cummings called a halt and squinted through his old field glasses. He gulped when he saw another man far above, watching him through powerful glasses.

"There's an hombre about a mile ahead on a high ledge," Gospel explained; "he thumbed his nose at me."

"You don't have to do it," Yancey said with a chuckle.

"It's Demingway, and if he knows sign-language, I can talk to him some with my hands," Cummings told Fleming.

He cupped the glasses to his eyes, made signs with his hands, and sighed with disappointment.

"What did he say?" Burke asked. "He used to trade with the Comanches down in Texas."

"He said, 'go to hell'," Cummings answered. "Said to tell Burke he had what he wanted."

"He must mean the old map," Burke muttered.

"What map?" Fleming asked curiously.

"An old Mexican map giving the location of the Vallejo treasure. We never did find it, but there are several inaccurate copies."

Shorty Benson said: "Ask Charley. He was robbed last night."

"Did you lose a map, Charley?" Fleming asked.

Compton slowly nodded. "I had one sewed up in my saddle-skirts," he admitted.

"You damned fool!" Burke burst out. "That's the first place an outlaw would look!"

"Yeah," Compton agreed, staring at the ground. "Jose Morales gave me the map the night he died. Told me to memorize it in my head, and then destroy it."

"Never send a boy to do a man's work," Burke growled. "Now Cord Demingway has the map!"

"Where's the treasure?" Fleming asked.

"In Lost River Cave," Charley answered.

"Make sign-talk to Demingway,"

Fleming ordered Cummings. "Tell him they have forty-eight hours to clear out of the Strip, or we will plant them right here!"

Cummings raised his glasses and talked with his right hand. "Same as before," he reported. "Thumbed his nose at me."

"You don't have to do it," Yancey repeated.

"I heard you the first time," Cummings growled.

"They won't find the treasure in forty-eight hours," Compton said confidently.

"I knew it," Cummings said with a grimace. "Here comes the law. Saint John will try to swear us all in to make a posse. You gents suit yourselves; I'm going back to Three points!"

## 8

JOHN SAINT JOHN galloped his big gray gelding when he saw the group of men preparing to quit the badlands. The big deputy blocked the narrow trail effectively by the simple expedient of broadsiding his horse across it. "There's been murder done. boys!" he shouted. "I deputize you all as a special posse to ride in after the killer!"

"Killers," Compton corrected dryly; "there's more than one of them."

"How did you know?" Saint John demanded in surprise.

"It figured," Compton answered promptly. "When you went to the jail this morning, you found Cuchillo Lopez and that big gunhawk both dead."

Ace Fleming appeared startled; Gospel Cummings stared at Charley, with his eyes half closed. Saint John leaned forward with his hand close to his holstered gun. "You and Lopez had words here and in Texas," he accused harshly; "mebbe you didn't want him to talk!"

"He talked plenty before you took him to Vaca town," Compton said carelessly. "That's why I knew you'd wake up and find him dead some morning."

Gospel Cummings relaxed with a sigh of relief. He was learning to respect Compton's uncanny ability to foretell the actions and reactions of other men. Now that Compton had explained his predictions, it seemed obvious to all except the stubborn deputy.

"Looks like I'll have to take you in and hold you for investigation, Compton," he said importantly.

"Nuh uh, Saint," Compton contradicted lazily. "I'd get the same thing Lopez and his big pard got. You sleep too sound. Guilty or not guilty?"

Saint John squirmed as the burden of guilt was placed squarely on his wide shoulders. He had helped the doctor dress the wounds of the two prisoners. It had been four o'clock in the morning when he had placed them in the same cell. He had sat down at his desk to rest for a minute, and had slept an hour. The sounds of the shots ha awakened him, but then it was too late.

"They were shot through the window from the outside," he offered weakly. "Lopez got it between the eyes, but that big hombre took two slugs between the shoulders. The sign left by two horses led this way; I knew the killers were part of the Demingway gang."

"They were both killers," Gospel Cummings said slowly. "The wages of sin!"

"Saved the law a lot of expense," Stingaree Burke muttered. "Like Fleming said—it makes our job easier, the more those owlhooters fight among themselves."

"We might as well get back to the Circle F and do the work we get paid to do," Skid Yancey suggested. "I've already got a job," he told Saint John.

"Did I offer you one?" the deputy demanded angrily.

"You're in a rut, lawman," Yancey said bluntly. "Every time you want to be a hero, you try to deputize every man within the sound of your gentle, whispering voice."

"I can count on you and Fleming, Gospel," Saint John said hopefully.

Cummings refused the suggestion. "Count me out; I helped last night over at Dog Town, remember? Seems to me we all could use a bit of rest now."

Saint John grudgingly yielded the trail. He rode back with the party to the forks where the Circle F men turned east. Gospel Cummings rode on toward Three Points, and the deputy hesitated and then rode with him.

"Being the law, I ought to tell you," Cummings said slowly. "After Charley rode back from Vaca last night, he stripped his riding-gear and hung it in the barn. We slept three hours, but we had visitors from Lost River while we slept. Compton had an old map sewed between his saddle-skirts; it was gone when we went out to saddle up for the ride to the Circle F!"

"Why didn't you tell me back there?" the deputy demanded.

Cummings shrugged wearily. "We'd just been through it all with Charley," he explained. "You'd have sat tall in the saddle and gone through the whole go-around again, and tempers were touchy. Nothing you could do about it nohow."

"Withholding evidence," Saint John complained. "I could place a charge against you for that."

"Your pitiful blind old step-pappy!" Cummings almost shouted. "I just told you, so how can you construe that as withholding evidence, you thick-headed old wart-hog?"

"Don't yell at me, you long-jointed old pelican!" Saint John bellowed. "One of the days I'll come apart and do you a meanness you won't forget!"

"Look, Saint," Cummings said patiently, "you've been threatening to do that for years. There's no time like the present. Let's both light down by my cabin, lay our hardware aside, and see who is the best man!"

"Sorry I got to fighting my head, Gospel," Saint John murmured softly. "What would that get us, fist-fighting each other?"

"I'd like to know—but you keep suggesting it," Cummings answered with a frosty smile. "When are the funerals?"

"Tomorrow morning," Saint John accepted the change of subjects. "County jobs without fee to you."

CUMMINGS nodded and rode back to his little barn. Saint John continued up the trail to Vaca; after stripping his gear, Gospel walked slowly to his cabin and entered the open door. He smiled when he saw four gold pieces lying on his deal table; what Saint John didn't know would not bother his conscience.

Cummings pocketed the money and sat down to wait for the coffee to get hot. Both hands went to the tails in his long coat. His left hand drew out the worn Bible and laid it on the table. His right produced the quart of Three Daisies.

"Time of the year a man might catch a cold," Cummings muttered, and his head went back as his right arm came up to his lips.

Cummings opened the Book started to read, and then raised his head slightly. He had heard no sound, but some sixth sense warned him of an alien presence. His right hand started to move slowly toward his holstered sixshooter. "Let it ride, oldtimer; I come in peace."

Cummings stopped his hand when a low, deep voice spoke quietly. He did not turn, but his mind was busy checking voices he had heard. For a long moment he sat thus, and then he smiled. "Come in, Matthews; enter under the sign of peace!"

A tall man stepped inside with his right hand held shoulder-high, the palm turned outward. Gospel Cummings

made the same sign; motioned to a chair at the table.

"How did you know me?" Matthews asked curiously.

"I've never heard your voice before, but I recognized a note of youth and authority," Cummings explained; "I've talked quite a bit to Charley Compton. What's on your mind?"

"Charley Compton," Matthews answered without hesitation, thereby increasing the respect Cummings already had for him. "Charley and I used to be saddlepards and good friends; I wish it was that way again."

"The eternal triangle," Cummings murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You don't," Gospel contradicted. "You know what I'm talking about, and facts are facts!"

"I reckon you are right, oldtimer," Matthews admitted. "How much do you know?"

"Hmm," Cummings said musingly. "About what, for instance?"

"About Charley, Stingaree Burke, and Mona Belle," Matthews said, more explicitly.

"Taking them in order; Charley was a Texas Ranger one time, and so were you," Cummings answered. "Burke was a lawyer, and manager of the Box V Ranch. Mona Belle was the owner of the Vallejo Rancho carrying that brand. Now let me ask a question, and use your own judgment. What put you on the owlhoot trail?"

Swifty Matthews glanced at Cummings, studied the lined face briefly, and quickly nodded. Matthews was an even six feet, fast in all his movements, but with a restraint unusual in one of his years.

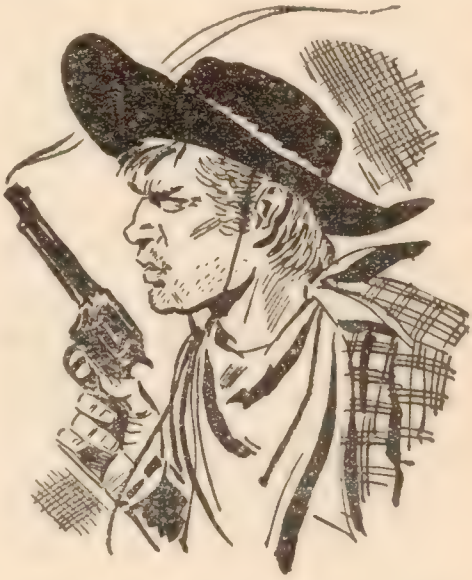
"I'm a year older than Charley," he answered quietly. "Twenty-five, to be exact. I was orphaned when I was ten; a man by the name of Joe Compton took me in and gave me a home. Yeah; Charley's father. He was sheriff of Webb County; Laredo was the county seat. That tell you anything, you being a Texas man your ownself?"

"Laredo is on the Rio Grande, right across from Mexico," Cummings said musingly, and then his brown eyes brightened. "The Vallejo Rancho is near Laredo," he continued. "Cord Demingway's brother was killed in Laredo by a gent name of Swifty Matthews. That adds quite a few pieces to the puzzle when put in their proper places."

Matthews frowned to show that he did not understand. "Puzzle?" he repeated.

"This whole matter of all you Texas folks coming up here in the Strip, Territory of Arizona," Cummings went on. "The Vallejo Rancho is in Webb County, Texas. The Vallejo treasure is supposed to be buried up here in the Strip. Now where does Pug Jones fit in?"

"He's a cold killer," Matthews said quietly. "He had delusions of power. He's the boss of Dog Town like you know, but it goes much further than that."



"Mona Belle Courtney," Cummings said gently. "A beautiful girl with spirit."

"That's bait," Matthews said harshly; "I'm not taking it!"

"I didn't look you up," Cummings reminded. "You came here to see me. Why?"

"Because Mona Belle is in danger," Matthews answered sullenly.

CUMMINGS said, "She has plenty of friends and protection now; Mona Belle is staying at the Circle F with her uncle, and Charley Compton works for Ace Fleming. You were saying?"

"I've got to see her," Matthews said earnestly. "And I can't go to the Circle F!"

"Nuh uh," Cummings said sternly. "No you don't, Swifty Matthews. I won't be a go-between; besides, Charley Compton is a friend of mine!"

"The stubborn knothead!" Matthews said angrily. "He's a friend of mine, to—or at least, he used to be!"

"And he's in love with Mona Belle," Cummings said slowly. "So are you!"

Swifty Matthews jerked and laid his right hand on his holstered gun. Gospel Cummings moved with a speed that was unsuspected from his usual manner. His sixshooter leaped out and covered Matthews, who stared at the gaping muzzle and slowly raised his hands to a level with his ears.

"I'm sorry, Gospel Cummings," Matthews made his manners. "I should have known better after hearing about you. Yes, I'm in love with Mona Belle; I've always loved her!"

"So don't ask me to play Cupid," Cummings warned sternly. "You want to talk some more?"

"There's a document with that treasure," Matthews said slowly. "The original grant from the Mexican government; it's more than a hundred years old. Mona Belle is the only living relative of old Don Alvarado Vallejo; that grant would prove her ownership to the vast Vallejo Rancho!"

"Does Charley know this?" Gospel asked.

"I couldn't say—but in some way we've got to find that treasure before Demingway or Pug Jones gets to it. The original grant was for two hundred thousand acres, but several small pieces have been sold down through the years."

"What's your own interest?" Cummings asked shrewdly.

"I own ten sections—about sixty-five hundred acres," Matthews answered honestly. "I don't mind admitting I won it in a poker game...from Joe Demingway."

"Just before you killed him?" Cummings asked.

"A week before," Matthews explained. "He asked for revenge, and tried to deal an ace off the bottom. He went for his gun, but he shot second. That's what put me to sleeping with the owls!"

"Thou shalt not kill," Cummings said sternly.

"It was him or me," Matthews said simply; "I'm still alive."

"And on the dodge," Cummings remarked dryly.

"There's no charge against me up here," Matthews said coldly. "Down in Texas, the witnesses were all friends of the deceased!"

"Where does Charley fit in?"

"That triangle you mentioned," Matthews said grimly. "On top of that, Charley owns—or he did own—twenty sections of the old grant. His father, sheriff Joe Compton, bought it cheap during a long drought. It's all he left Charley; but right now a Syndicate claims ownership to the whole grant!"

"That's where Stingaree Burke fits in," Cummings murmured. "He's a law-sharp.... There must have been a treasure map."

"There are a dozen," Matthews agreed. "But there was only one authentic map, and Jose Morales had it. If the outlaws get that map, the Syndicate will win!"

"It does not seem to worry Charley much," Gospel said with a shrug.

Matthews gasped and leaned forward. "What do you mean by that?" he asked sharply.

"The map was stolen from Charley last night," Cummings answered. "He had it sewed between the skirts of his saddle, and one of Demingway's men

must have found it last night while we were asleep."

"I've got to see Charley!" Matthews said harshly. "There is no reason why he and I can't work together!"

CUMMINGS stroked his long brown beard. "I can tell him what you said," he murmured thoughtfully. "Charley has nothing but praise for you—that is, up to a certain point. Those reasons are perhaps personal, and between you and him."

"Charley Compton does not know the meaning of fear," Matthews said earnestly. "He don't go barging in without first using his head; he was one of the best rangers on the force, and I ought to know!"

"Yeah, that's right," Cummings agreed. "And he's mighty fast with a sixshooter!"

He watched Matthews' face as he spoke. He was surprised when Matthews nodded agreement. "One of the fastest, and as straight as he shoots," Matthews said earnestly.

"Then you all three grew up," Cummings said quietly.

Matthews did not try to dissemble. "That's right—all three of us. Charley and I love the same girl, but the choice will be up to Mona Belle!"

"It usually is," Cummings commented. "You took a chance coming down here; some of the Demingway crowd drops in once in a while—usually after a killing, and when I'm away."

"Life is that way," Matthews answered with a shrug. "None of us can expect to live forever. I saw that big deputy sheriff ride toward Vaca," Matthews continued. "For a gent his size, he seems to need a lot of help."

"So you heard about the ruckus in Dog Town," Cummings murmured. "I reckon none of us is very big when he takes in so much territory that the enemy can get in behind him. Saint John has a tough job, and he does the best he can—as he sees it."

Matthews made his decision quickly. "I'll be riding; if you see Charley, tell him what I said."

He went to the door, glanced down the road to Vaca, and drew back. Then he glanced up at the upper trail, and muttered something Cummings could not understand.

"Anyplace I can hide?" Matthews asked anxiously. "Charley is coming down the trail, and Saint John riding in from Vaca."

"Behind that curtain where I keep my clothes," Cummings said gruffly. "That's the only place, and you are likely to be seen or heard."

Matthews slid behind the muslin curtain as a horse stopped at the tie-rail. A moment later Charley Compton rode down and dismounted, and both men came toward the cabin. Saint John came in first and asked Cummings a direct question.

"Swifty Matthews was seen in the neighborhood. Have you seen him, Gospel?"

Cummings could see Charley Compton right behind the deputy, standing on the steps. "I was just fixing to grab a little sleep," Gospel complained.

"There's no rest for the wicked," Saint John said with a grin. "You didn't answer my queston."

"I saw him," Cummings answered gruffly. "I see all kinds of people down here at the crossroads. Is that against the law?"

"When was he here?" Compton interrupted, as he edged in beside the deputy.

"This morning, not long since," Gospel replied.

"He's wanted for a killing down in Texas," Saint John stated; "I'd like to ask that gent a few questions."

"You've got no warrant for Matthews," Compton interrupted.

"Don't need one," Saint John said bluntly. "But he knows something about Demingway, and that treasure every one seems to be hunting; treasure always leads to sudden death for somebody."

Charley Compton pressed his lips together and said he'd be riding along. Saint John glared at Cummings. "I'll cut his sign some day," he stated heav-

ily. "You're not much help, Gospel."'

CHARLEY COMPTON went out and mounted his horse. He started up the trail, watched until Saint John had ridden toward town, and then circled the little barn. He dismounted, ground-tied his horse with trailing whangs, and walked slowly back to the cabin. Gospel Cummings showed surprise when Compton came in.

"You forget something?" he asked.

Compton looked at the gaunt plainsman for a long moment. "I came back to have a talk with Swifty," he said quietly. "You're not a convincing liar, Gospel," he continued. "I saw that curtain move, and I saw a boot pulled back. Come on out...Malden!"

Swifty Matthews flipped the curtain and stepped into the room. His right hand was raised with the palm turned out in the sign of peace. "How, Charley," he greeted Compton. "Long time no see."

"Howdy," Compton grunted. "You damn fool; why did you ride down here in broad daylight?"

"To have a talk with you," Matthews answered quickly. "Did you know that Pug Jones has about a dozen gunfighters on his payroll?"

Compton showed that he did not understand. "I knew he had some," he admitted. "What's this got to do with me?"

"Mebbe nothing; perhaps everything," Matthews said with a shrug. "Pug Jones has a big piece of the Syndicate that is claiming the Vallejo Rancho. Most of them are from Texas, and they will head back there after this treasure hunt is over!"

"The hell you say!" Compton said jerkily, and then he eyed Matthews suspiciously. "How did you find out about the Syndicate?"

"Come off it, Charley," Matthews answered testily. "I found out about it the day after I won that ten sections of land from Joe Demingway, down in Laredo. I had to take to the brush after Demingway and I settled our differences, and I've kept my ear to the ground!"

"You called him...Malden," Gospel said, curiously.

"That's his name; his front handle," Compton answered, maliciously.

"Fiddle-faddle and chit-chat," Matthews said gruffly. "What's this I hear about you having the old map to the treasure, and losing it like a dude pilgrim?"

"You didn't hear that with an ear to the ground," Compton said angrily, and he turned on Gospel Cummings. "Well?"

"Yeah, I told him," Cummings admitted. "Every one else knows it, and I didn't think it was a secret any longer."

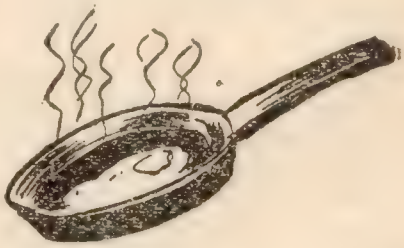
"It means war now," Matthews said quietly. "Just as soon as Pug Jones gets the news, he will attack Demingway with his full force!"

"Anything wrong with that?" Compton asked, and he gazed levelly at his one-time friend.

SWIFTY MATTHEWS swallowed hard. "You mean to stand there and say you figured it like this?" he demanded. "When you know what that treasure means to Mona Belle?"

"That ten sections you won at poker used to belong to the Vallejo Rancho," Compton said coldly.

"So did the twenty sections you own!" Matthews retorted.



Charley sighed and dropped his eyes.

"Stalemate," Gospel said judiciously. "Why don't both you boys back off and try it again?"

"Cuchillo Lopez was a Demingway man," Matthews said suddenly. "Pug

Jones knew it; that's why he made no real play to protect the Mexican."

"We haven't done bad up to now," Compton said slowly. "Tally the score, and you'll find all those hombres have been owlhooters. The ones Gospel has sleeping back there in Hell's Half Acre," he added.

He stopped, and a flush of contrition appeared on his face when he saw the brooding expression of sadness in the plainsman's deep-set brown eyes. Matthews saw it also, and a strained silence fell over the three men. After a moment Cummings spoke in a quiet, gentle voice. "You boys will have to fight together," and his words were like a prophecy. "The triangle can wait until later!"

Neither Matthews or Compton made any attempt to misunderstand. Both had been born and raised in cattle-country on the wild frontier, where boys grow early into men, and where the social art of dissembling is almost unknown.

"Me and him have always fought together!" Swifty Matthews said almost fiercely. "Even as buttons we had to fight together, or kill each other; it was that close and it still is!"

"Yeah," Charley Compton murmured just above his breath. "It still is!"

"Forget about that!" Cummings admonished sternly. "No matter how a personal ruckus would come out, some one else would be hurt the most!"

Both men knew he was speaking of Mona Belle Courtney. They faced each other squarely; both had right hands hooked in their gun-belts, above open holsters. They stared into each other's eyes, faces hard.

Swifty Matthews made the first overture. "Here's my hand, Charley. I'd go to hell for you in my bare feet!"

"The same to you, you damned owlhooter," Charley Compton answered in a savage growl, and his hand met the hard flesh of Matthews and gripped down like a vise.

"That's better, and it goes for both of you," Cummings said approvingly. "If you can't whup 'em...jine 'em!"

"I wanted to warn you, Charley," Matthews said in a hard, brittle voice. "Pug Jones put a five thousand dollar reward on your scalp."

Charley Compton stared at Matthews, and then smiled. "You could have collected that bounty," he said with a chuckle. "You didn't even consider it!"

"That's right, and now I've got to be riding," Matthews answered quietly. "Watch your back, Charley, or get Skid Yancey to do it."

"I wish it was you rubbing stirrups with me," Compton said, a trifle wistfully. *"Hasta la vista!"*

"Till we meet again," Matthews repeated, and he left the cabin and headed for a dim trail up behind the old barn.

"There rides a man, Charley," Cummings said at Compton's shoulder. "But life is like that."

"I know," Compton growled, and he was thinking about the oft-repeated triangle in so many human lives. "He'll do to take along!"

"Which you might remember when the payoff comes," Gospel said dryly.

"Meaning?"

"You know what I mean," Cummings answered testily. "Right now you're setting a couple of traps to have those two outfits of owlhooters take it to each other. You planted that map where you knew it would be found. I don't know what you have

in mind beyond that point, but I can read the sign that far!"

"I better be riding back to the Circle F," Compton said abruptly. "I want to have a talk with somebody."

"Better make it old Stingaree," Cummings suggested. "He thinks a heap of you!"

## 9

MONA BELLE Courtney was waiting with Sandra Fleming on the large porch of the Circle F ranch-house when Charley Compton rode into the yard. Mona Belle held little Deloise on her lap, and the child called to Compton who was riding on to the big barn.

"Come see me, Cholly. You come on up here!"

No one on the Circle F argued with Deloise; she gave her orders in an imperious manner, like one who was accustomed to being obeyed. Compton obediently turned his horse, stopped at the tie-rail, and swung down to the ground.

"Why howdy, Sugar-Foots," he greeted the child. "You have been talking with old Woo Fong. The name is Charley, remember?"

"Come up and sit a spell, Cholly," Mona Belle added mischeviously.

Compton stopped and glared at the girl. Mona Belle was wearing a white silk blouse, divided leather skirt, and pee-wee high-heeled boots. The rich coloring in her dusky cheeks added to her beauty, and accentuated her dark eyes.

"You, too?" Compton asked. "I had quite a talk with Malden," he added spitefully.

Deloise slid from Mona Belle's lap and ran to Compton. He sat down on a step, and the child climbed into his arms and put her chubby arms around his neck.

"Who's Malden?" she asked curiously.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love you," Compton tried to change the subject, when he saw the flush on Mona Belle's lovely face.

"Kiss me," Deloise demanded; "who's Malden?"

"He's just a wandering cowboy on the loose," Compton answered carelessly, and he kissed the little girl on the cheek.

"I love you too, Cholly," Deloise whispered. "Do you love Mona Belle?"

"Deloise!" Sandra Fleming said sternly. "Let's you and I go into the house."

"Sure I do," Compton answered quickly, to embarrass Mona Belle.

"Do you kiss her?" Deloise asked, as her mother tried to urge her toward the living-room door.

"Ask Mona Belle," Compton said with a chuckle.

"He does not," Mona Belle said icily; "only the little girls kiss Cholly."

"That's right," Compton admitted sadly. "When I was little, the big girls kissed me, and when I grew big, the little girls kissed me. They ain't no justice, Sugar-Foots."

"You must have work to do," Mona Belle reminded coldly. "I will go in and help Sandra."

"You are not interested in what Malden said?" Compton asked maliciously.

Sandra Fleming looked puzzled, but she took Deloise into the house, leaving Mona Belle and Compton alone. Compton smiled wistfully and then glanced at the door.

"Want to take a walk over by the corral?" he asked.

Mona Belle arose reluctantly. It was evident that only her curiosity about Swifty Matthews made her agree to Compton's suggestion. Compton fell in beside her, picked up his

trailing bridle-reins, and led his horse over to a large holding-corral.

"We were overheard the last time we talked on the porch," Compton said, just above his breath.

MONA BELLE faced him squarely. "You had a map, and you didn't tell me," the girl accused bitterly. "You got it from Jose Morales the night he died, but you kept it a secret."

"That's right," Compton agreed; "I had good reasons."

"Now the outlaws have the map," the girl continued angrily.

"Yeah," Compton admitted moodily.

"Did it give the exact location of the treasure?" Mona Belle asked.

"I'm afraid it did," Compton admitted reluctantly. "The treasure is hidden back there in Lost River Cave."

There was a strained silence for a long moment, and then the girl spoke. "What did Swifty have to say, and where did you see him?"

"Down at Gospel Cummings' cabin," Compton answered. "Malden was hiding behind a curtain, and Saint John was there. He didn't see Malden," he added.

"Are you trying to irritate me?" the girl asked. "You always called him Swifty."

"Look, Mona Belle," Compton ground out savagely. "You have been irritating me for more than four months. There was a time when I thought we were more than just good friends; now we don't seem to be very good friends."

"Was it friendly to withhold information from me?" the girl asked quietly. "After all, I am the great-grand-daughter of Don Alvarado Vallejo, and so far as we know, his sole living relative."

"And heir," Compton added. "You own nearly all of the old land-grant given to Don Alvarado, and which made up the Vallejo Rancho."

"Except for two pieces which my father sold," Mona Belle reminded. "Now you own twenty sections of the land."

"Malden owns the other ten sections," Compton said spitefully.

The girl drew back in startled surprise. "He does? I never knew about that!"

"It isn't a secret," Compton said bluntly. "That's the real reason Swifty is on the dodge," he added, honestly. "He won it in a poker game from Joe Demingway back in Laredo. A week later Demingway tried to win back the land; he dealt an Ace from the bottom of the deck, and then made a pass for his gun. Swifty was too fast for him, and they buried Joe Demingway. He wanted you to know!"

"Thank you for telling me, Charley," the girl said, and now her face was once more lovely when she smiled. "Swifty will sell that land back to me if we get this all straightened out." She stopped and glanced at his tanned face expectantly. "Well?" she asked.

"Yes," Compton said with a nod. "There's a deep well on my twenty sections."

"I know it," the girl said impatiently. "Your father had that well drilled, and I watched them bring it in."

"So did I," Compton growled.

"You will sell it to me?"

"No," Compton answered firmly. "I always figured to get the start of a spread down there. I still do!"

"Is this blackmail?" Mona Belle demanded.

"Sometimes a fella will give away, what he won't sell," Compton said with a smile. "We can talk about that later, after this other business has been settled."

"If we clear up the title to the ranch, you will always have your old job as foreman of Rancho Vallejo," Mona Belle reminded.

"Thanks, boss," Compton said coldly. "But with that twenty sections, I

can always go there if I get fired."

"I almost hate you," Mona Belle said angrily. "When I tell Uncle Burke what you have said, he will know what to do!"

"You do that," Compton agreed; "I've already talked to Stingaree."

THERE WAS another long pause, and then Mona Belle came closer to Compton. "What else did Swifty say?" she asked hopefully.

"Now listen good," Compton said heavily, and he did not meet her dark eyes. "Pug Jones is in this thing up to his neck. He's repping for a Syndicate who is trying to get Rancho Vallejo. There is big money behind this Syndicate, and they want no part of Cord Demingway."

"That means Pug Jones and his hired gunhands will make war on Demingway," Mona Belle said slowly. She looked closely at Compton. "Where does that leave you...and Swifty?"

"Swifty Matthews and I always fought together in the old days," Compton said, sullenly; "there isn't any real reason why we should change now!"

Mona Belle stared at him and then gripped his arms. "You and Swifty would do this for me, Charley?" she whispered. "I like you both very much!"

"That's the hell of it," Compton said tonelessly. "I mean, it really is for both Swifty and me. It's what old Gospel called a triangle."

"He knows?" Mona Belle whispered.

"That night we talked on the porch," Compton answered. "I reckon we both talked too much, and too loud. We were overheard, but the triangle can wait."

"Why didn't you tell me about the map?" Mona Belle asked slowly.

"I made a promise to Jose Morales," Compton admitted stiffly. "He did most of the talking; he was dying even then. I listened, and he swore me to secrecy!"

Mona Belle shook her head. "It is a puzzle, isn't it?" she said hopelessly.

"But more pieces are turning up every day," Compton reminded. "Some day they will all fit together."

"Promise me one thing, Charley," Mona Belle requested earnestly. "If you ever think of selling your twenty sections, give me the first chance to buy."

"It's a promise," Compton agreed. "Now I want to see Stingaree."

"You will find him in the bunkhouse," Mona Belle directed. "Thanks, Charley."

She left him and returned to the big house. Charley Compton tied his horse and went to the bunkhouse. Stingaree Burke was looking over some papers he had taken from a bulging pair of saddle-bags. He glanced up at Compton inquiringly.

"Can you draw up a will?" Compton asked abruptly.

"I can," Burke answered. "Something important on your mind?"

"It could be," Compton said carelessly. "Make it simple and to the point. If anything happens to me, I want Mona Belle to have that twenty sections of land I own. You know all about it—the boundary-descriptions, metes and bounds. Better do it as soon as you can."

Stingaree Burke studied the fighting face for a brief moment. "I'll have it done by suppertime," he answered. "I'll be one witness; Ace Fleming all right with you for the other one?"

"Suits me fine, and Ace won't talk," Compton agreed.

"Be doubly careful from now on," Burke warned. "I heard about that bounty Pug Jones offered for the Syndicate!"

COMPTON seemed surprised. "How did you hear?" he asked.

"Tim Kelly has a friend in the *Silver Dollar*," Burke explained. "Tim took the night shift in the *Casino* to let Fat Farrell have a day off. This friend of Tim's rode over from Dog Town last night. You ever hear of an hombre named Brett Slagle?"

Charley Compton's nostrils began to flare. He nodded his head, and his right hand went to his sixshooter and twitched it against hang.

"I know the gent," he answered. "One of the fastest gunhawks along the border. We played a game of draw one time; it ended that way."

"What way?"

"In a draw," Compton answered grimly. "I got him in the left shoulder; his slug burned me across the left ribs. He was wanted for a killing, but the jury acquitted him. Why do you ask?"

"He's over at Red Dog," Burke answered slowly. "He's looking for you. Told it scarey that you and him had some unfinished business; now I know what that business is!"

"I've looked forward to the day," Compton said in a husky whisper. "I knew it would come; I'm faster than I was the time we played it out to a dead heat."

"So you've practiced ever since," Burke said dryly. "That's good insurance, but you've got more important work to do now."

"He isn't wanted, as far as I know," Compton said slowly. "He can come and go as he likes, so long as he don't break the local laws."

"Tim said to warn you," Burke continued. "Slagle packs a hideout gun under his left arm. Better stay away from Vaca for a while."

Compton stared at the white-haired lawyer. "Are you telling me to ride into Vaca?" he asked quietly.

"No-o," Burke said slowly. "But I knew you would. I wish you had Swifty Matthews to side you."

"I saw Swifty this morning," Compton said with a smile. "He was down at Three Points in Gospel's cabin; mebbe you knew that, too."

"The hell you whisper!" Burke ejaculated. "What did he want?"

"For one thing, he warned me about the bounty on my scalp," Compton answered. "The rest of it was personal."

Stingaree Burke slowly shook his head. "There's blood on the moon," he said sadly. "I hope it isn't yours."

"Who wants to live forever?" Compton asked flippantly.

Burke stared at Compton and frowned. "Was it as bad as that?" he asked. "I saw you talking to Mona Belle down by the corral."

"Mebbe it was," Compton growled. "You seen the boss about?"

"He's in his office," Burke directed. "Fleming is going over his cattle-tallies; claims he is losing more beef than just camp-meat for those owl-hooters. Fact is, he wants to see you."

COMPTON nodded and left the bunkhouse. He rode up to the little office at one end of the big house. It wasn't a long walk, but horses were made to ride. Compton dismounted and entered the office.

"Good morning, boss," he began.

"I said good morning to you before sunup," Fleming reminded, and then he smiled. "Anything new?"

"Nothing you don't know," Compton replied. "You've heard about Brett Slagle and the Syndicate!"

"Yes," Fleming admitted. "What was your idea in planting that map where you knew it would be found?" he demanded, suddenly.

Compton stared with his lips parted. "Who told you that?" he asked.

"Look, Charley," Fleming said bluntly. "I've been a gambler all my life. I've been a cattleman most of it, too. I can read sign, and sometimes I can read men. Did you find any more pieces to the puzzle?"

Compton nodded. "I saw Swifty Matthews down at Three Points," he admitted.

"Yeah, I knew," Fleming said quietly.

"You knew? Who told you?"

"Saint John; he knew Matthews was behind that curtain at Gospel's!"

"I'll be damned!" Compton said jerkily. "I didn't think that big moose saw Swifty's boot!"

"For one time, the Saint used his head," Fleming said quietly; "he also knew he wouldn't get far with both you and Gospel."

"What did you want with me?" Compton asked lamely.

"I'm in the middle here," Fleming said slowly. "The treasure is near my land, and that gold-mine is on Circle F range. You are working for me, and I'm losing beef; now if you were me, what would you do?"

"I'd play both ends against the middle, the same way you are doing it," Compton answered promptly. "Then I'd let human nature take its course, and stand by to give it a hand where needed."

Fleming nodded with a smile. "You can read sign, too," he admitted. "Look at how the cards lie," he continued. "Mona Belle and Stingaree Burke staying here at the Circle F. Tim Kelly working relief at the *Casino*. You on my payroll at fighting pay. Then there is Swifty Matthews, Brett Slagle; Pug Jones and Cord Demingway. That's quite a layout in any man's language."

"And it all ties in together," Compton added. "You're the boss!"

"I'm not sure about that," Fleming said doubtfully. "But we have fought outlaws up here before. Not only that—but each time, Lost River Cave figured in the deal."

"It seems to follow a pattern," Compton said musingly. "Gospel Cummings is more or less neutral, but each time he is dragged into the ruckus, no matter what he does."

"He is neutral up to the point where the laws are broken, and human rights are jeopardized," Fleming corrected. "Gospel stands for law and order."

COMPTON changed the subject. "Brett Slagle; I'll have to give him a chance."

"Of course," Fleming agreed. "Or get shot from the brush. After Slagle, then what?"

"Demingway is trying to find the Vallejo treasure right now," Compton stated. "Pug Jones is repping for the Syndicate, and they will move in against Demingway."

"Saint John is riding out here tonight to see Stingaree," Fleming said carelessly.

"So what do you want Yancey and me to do tonight?" Compton asked innocently.

"Tim Kelly will be helping Fat Farrel at the *Casino*," Fleming answered. "You ride in and tell Fat to take the usual precautions; tell him some of the Dog Town crowd will be there tonight."

Compton went to the kitchen when the cook beat on a triangle with a short iron bar. After the meal, Stingaree Burke left with Compton.

"I'll ride in with you and Skid tonight," Burke offered. "To keep Brett Slagle honest."

"Thanks, Stingaree," Compton murmured. "Now I'm crawling in my bunk to make up some sleep."

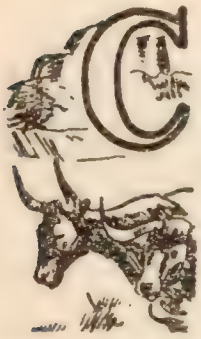
Burke was working on some papers when Fleming came into the bunkhouse. The gambler came straight to the point. "How much chance has Charley got against Slagle?"

"Close," Burke whispered. "Charley is right, while Slagle is wrong."

"That's odds enough for any man," Fleming said quietly. "I sent Shorty Benson to warn some of the cattlemen. Cole Brighton and Charley Saunders will ride in with their crews just in case Pug Jones brings his gunhands to Vaca."

Charley Compton slept soundly. He awoke instantly when Yancey touched his shoulder. "Suppertime," Yancey said. "Let's wash up after you clean your sixshooter!"

## 10



CHARLEY COMPTON rode through the long twilight with Skid Yancey, heading for Three Points, and the road to Vaca. Neither had much to say, but each was busy with his thoughts. Two miles from the Circle F, they met a Box B cowboy who carried a rifle across his knees. A mile farther they met an S Bar S puncher, similarly armed. When they saw a third cowboy, evidently making a patrol, Compton spoke briefly to his saddle-pard.

"Ace Fleming has spread the word, Skid. Every cattle-outfit in these parts seems to be sending reps to guard against bushwhackers. You know what that means."

"Means Ace is afraid Pug Jones is sending a force of his gunfighters over from Dog Town," Yancey answered promptly. "Means we are going to have some law and order in these parts while Saint John is making medicine with Stingaree, back on the Circle F."

He rode closer to Compton and lightly touched his shoulder. Compton looked up with a question in his eyes. "Just wanted to touch a working cowboy worth five thousand dollars," Yancey explained with a grin. "Now I can tell my grandchildren about it a bit later."

"I know how an owlhooter feels, now," Compton answered gravely, "when he has a stiff price on his head."

"How we going to pass Three Points without old Gospel seeing us?" Yancey asked. "He's bound to give you that same old song and dance about: *'Thou shalt not kill'*. I wish we could miss him."

"We won't," Compton said briefly. "Yonder he comes on old Fred, that hip-shot sorrel of his. Let him do the talking."

Gospel Cummings rode off the trail and into the brush. He emerged a moment later, wiping his beard with his left hand. He nodded as the two cowboys came abreast, turned his horse, and rode beside Compton on the left.

"I wonder now," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if Pug Jones is bringing it to Vaca, after what Saint John threatened to do to Dog Town?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Compton admitted. "But they'd find it a bit hard to do."

"There is strength in organization," Cummings reminded. "Pug Jones is well organized."

"Ace Fleming sent word to all the ranches," Yancey told the gaunt plainsman. "If Pug rides over from Dog Town, it might be him who gets a surprise."

"Let's ride back in the brush off the trail," Compton said quietly. "Yonder comes the law, and he will be full of questions."

"You ride off," Cummings said with quiet dignity. "I am on my way home,

and the Saint won't think anything about it."

Compton and Yancey left the trail and rode deep into the trail-side brush. They could see the big deputy sky-lined against the setting sun, sitting deep in the saddle on his huge horse which was part Percheron. When Saint John met Cummings, he stopped to talk for a moment.

"You been over to the Circle F, Gospel?" he asked.

"Just riding around, as is my wont," Cummings answered. "Are you heading for the Circle F?"

Saint John nodded. "Want to talk some to Stingaree Burke. I'll stop in and see you on the way back."

"If the cabin is dark, ride on past," Cummings said gruffly. "I've been losing sleep here of late."

Saint John snorted and rode on toward the Circle F. Compton and Yancey gave him plenty of time to get out of sight before rejoining Gospel. Charley Compton seemed relaxed and cheerful, and there was an eager expression of expectancy in his dark blue eyes.

THEY PASSED Three Points and rode up the road leading to Vaca. Compton smiled as he stopped in front of the adobe jail. "Our horses will be safer down here," he suggested. "It's less than a block to the *Casino*."

"Saint John won't appreciate your sense of humor," Cummings warned. "I'll ride up the alley if you gents don't mind. I can tie old Fred under the trees behind the *Casino*, and I want to see a man about a dog."

He rode along as Compton and Yancey dismounted. "He don't have to see anybody," Yancey said quietly. "He's going to lay in some supplies, and Fat Farrel will like as not have four quarts wrapped up for him in an old newspaper."

The light was almost gone as the two cowboys started for the *Casino*. Yancey stared at two piles of trash in the wide street, one at each end of the block in which the *Casino* was located.

"Looks like election night," he said to Compton. "Only there ain't any election."

There was considerable traffic as the two cowboys walked along the boardwalk. Cowboys from the neighboring ranches walked their horses or stopped to talk with some old friend. Coal-oil lamps were lighted in stores and houses as full dark came to the little cowtown.

A string of horses were tied to the rails in front of the *Casino;* the long saloon was crowded when Compton and Yancey shouldered through the swinging, batwing doors. They stopped at the curve of the bar near the front doors, and Tim Kelly glanced at them and raised his eye-brows inquiringly.

"Whiskey straight for me," Yancey

said slowly.

"Small beer," Compton gave his order.

"He hasn't got here yet," Kelly said just under his breath. "Three of his pards are down at the far end of the bar. Watch yourself for a cross-fire!"

Compton nodded, dropped his right hand, and loosened his sixshooter against crimp. It had been three years since his last meeting with Brett Slagle; it seemed like only a few weeks ago.

Yancey downed his drink and poured a chaser of the same. Ace Fleming sat in the lookout's chair back in the gaming room. A tall cowboy stood near the back door where he could see the entire barroom.

"That's Charley Saunders of the S Bar S," Yancey whispered to Compton. "Him and Ace cleaned up one

gang of owlhooters here several years ago. We ain't doing so bad."

He stiffened when the swinging doors swished violently. A tall man slipped swiftly inside, placed his broad shoulders against the front wall, and waited for his eyes to shed the light. Charley Compton was watching the stranger in the back-bar mirror.

Skid Yancey knew, without telling, that Brett Slagle had arrived. Slagle was about thirty, lean and muscular, and undeniably handsome. He wore the crossed belts of the two-gun man; both holsters were thonged low and toed-in for a fast draw.

Slagle saw Compton; their eyes met in the mirror. Compton nodded his head without turning. Two other men entered the saloon and ordered drinks from Fat Farrel. Then Slagle left the front wall and walked down the long room. He stopped near the center of the bar, ordered whiskey straight, and pushed his 5X Beaver Stetson to the back of his head.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS came in from the alley and stood beside Charley Saunders. A half hour passed, with nothing but the usual hilarity taking place in the crowded saloon. Compton still cradled his untouched beer in his left hand; he spoke softly to Yancey when a quarrel broke out at the far end of the bar. "Get ready to duck," he said briefly. "It's coming!"

"I bought that last round!" a burly stranger said loudly.

"You're a liar," his companion accused "I bought the last round!"

The burly man slapped for his gun and sent a shot roaring down the bar. Charley Compton ducked low, and the slug splintered a front window. Two guns roared thunderously from the card-room as Gospel Cummings and Charley Saunders drew and fired at the same time. The burly man staggered and went to his knees with a bullet through the right shoulder. The other man was slapped into a turn with his sixshooter flying out of his shattered hand.

Ace Fleming was on his feet with a gun in each hand as Yancey and Compton straightened up and watched with interest. Compton was watching Brett Slagle, but the tall gunman downed his drink and turned his head to watch Ace Fleming.

"You two saddle-tramps are a menace to life and safety," Fleming told the wounded men. "You'll find the doctor's house down at the far end of the street, and you are lucky you didn't get killed!"

Brett Slagle ordered another drink as the two men slouched from the saloon. He played with it for a moment before raising the shot glass to his lips. Then he pushed away from the bar, wiping his lips with the back of his left hand. "This is going to be different," he stated clearly. "Somebody in this room is going to die tonight!"

Ace Fleming holstered his guns and watched the handsome stranger. Charley Compton placed his glass of beer on the bar and pushed clear. The drinkers along the bar moved to the back wall, watching the two gunfighters who turned to face each other; both were smiling.

"It's been three years, Compton," Slagle said quietly, but every man in the crowded room could hear him plain. "Three years, and about five hundred miles ago."

"Seems like yesterday," Compton

answered. "I never had much time for a bounty-hunter, Slagle!"

Six men along the back wall crouched forward with hands on their holstered guns. Tim Kelly reached under the bar and came out with a sawed-off shotgun. He covered two of the men without speaking. Several cowboys faced the other strangers with hands on their sixshooters.

"You strangers stay out of this," Slagle said, without turning his head. "I don't need any help, and Compton don't want any!"

"That's reading my mind," Compton agreed in a low drawl. "You all talked out?"

Slagle nodded. His nostrils were flaring like those of a stallion. He faced Compton in a crouch, his right hand taloned above his holster on that side.

"I'm ready," he said clearly.

Charley Compton saw the fine spray of wrinkles appear suddenly at the corners of Slagle's eyes. He struck down for his sixshooter just as Slagle made his bid. Orange flame lanced across the mahogany bar from two directions as sixshooters roared a stuttering duet.

The front window shattered just behind and a little to the left of Charley Compton. He caught his bucking gun high and eared back on the recoil for a follow-up.

BRETT SLAGLE took a backward step and a little to the left. His mouth popped open; a startled expression appeared briefly in his slate-colored eyes as the message from his punctured heart reached his brain. The smoking sixshooter tumbled from his hand to the dirty sawdust on the splintered planking. Slagle swayed forward as his knees buckled suddenly. Then he was face-down in the sawdust with his polished boots rattling out the last seconds of a futile life.

"Was it a fair shake, gents?" Tim Kelly asked solemnly.

Heads nodded all over the room to assure Charley Compton of an acquittal at his arraingement. A garish light suddenly was reflected into the saloon from the street. The two piles of trash had been kindled and were burning brightly.

The flat bark of a rifle came from out in the street, followed almost instantly by an answering fusillade. Then the thunder of hoofs as a dozen horsemen raced out of the shadows, and men from the saloon ran out through the back door into the alley to join the fight against the Dog Town raiders.

Gospel Cummings stood with his back to a wall, his twin sixshooters covering the gunmen against the wall. Tim Kelly held his position behind the bar with his scattergun eared back and ready to go.

Compton and Yancey went through the back and ran around the side of the adobe saloon to take a position behind some beer kegs near the street. Rifles barked flatly as hidden cowboys poured a withering fire after the racing horsemen.

In five minutes it was all over. Several horses were down in the wide street; here and there a man was lying motionless in the deep dust. The two fires were blazing brightly to warn the raiders against a return attack.

Charley Compton ejected the spent shells from his sixshooter; thumbed fresh cartridges from his gunbelt, and pushed them through the loading gate, with his hammer set on half-cock. Then he holstered the balanced weapon and went back into the saloon. Ace Fleming met him just inside the door. "Feeling better?" the dapper gambler asked.

Compton nodded. He did not look at Gospel Cummings who was watching him from the card-room. "We both waited three years," he said quietly; "that was long enough."

"He brought it to you," Fleming said gruffly. "You didn't have time to throw off your shot!"

Compton nodded, and glanced at

Gospel Cummings. Cummings holstered his twin sixes. He said nothing, but there was a brooding expression of sadness in his deep-set brown eyes.

"Well, say it!" Compton burst out savagely.

"The wages of sin," Cummings quoted solemnly, and turning on one high heel, he left the card room.

FAT FARREL met him in the little hall and shoved a whiskey bottle at Cummings. Then the bartender went back to his bar, leaving Cummings alone.

Gospel Cummings stared at the bottle in his left hand. That hand was trembling violently. Cummings stepped into the shadows; his head went back as his elbow bent. His hands were steady when he emerged from the shadows of privacy, wiping his silky brown beard with one calloused hand. He stooped to walk under the tree where he had left his horse, and a moment later he rode from the alley and headed for Three Points, and Hell's Half Acre.

A little man carrying a black bag pushed through the front doors of the *Casino*. He glanced at Fleming with a nod, went directly to the body of Brett Slagle, and made a brief routine examination.

"Right through the heart," he stated. "Death was almost instantaneous. Who did this homicide?"

"I did, Doc," Compton said slowly. "The name is Charley Compton, and I work for the Circle F. He called for showdown; he got it!"

"At least thirty witnesses, Doc," Fleming added. "How many down outside?"

"Five dead and two more probables," Doc Craig growled. "Two wounded, but able to ride, not counting that pair you sent down shortly after dark. What in hell happened here tonight?"

"Dog Town raiders," Fleming explained, briefly. "Saint John threatened to burn Dog Town to the ground. It looks like Pug Jones meant to beat him to it!"

"Where is the law?" the doctor asked testily.

"Out on the Circle F," Fleming answered with a faint smile curling his lips.

The doors burst inward under the thrust of a powerful shoulder. John Saint John stood framed in the doorway with a sixshooter in each big hand.

"Every man in this room is deputized to help the law!" he roared. "We'll get right over to Dog Town and jail that whole outfit. Hold up your right hands!"

Ace Fleming sighed and turned his back. Charley Compton and Skid Yancey started for the door. Saint John blocked them off.

"You've got a choice, cowboy!" he bellowed at Compton. "Either you pin on a law-badge, or go to jail for this killing!"

Tim Kelly coughed from behind the bar. His scattergun was trained on the big deputy; his deep voice was gruff when he spoke.

"The late Mister law," he said grimly. "Well, better late than never, I always say. I'll vouch for Compton; I saw the whole play. Self-defense, and thirty witnesses to testify that Slagle called for showdown!"

"And who in hell might you be?" Saint John asked coldly.

"Deputy U. S. Marshal with a roving commission," Kelly answered quietly. "I've been looking for Slagle for a year. He killed a lawman down in Texas, but I couldn't extradite him from up here. You want to make something out of it, deputy?"

"I figured you for a lawdog," Saint John said, more quietly. "I could use some help up here right now. Glad to have you, and you can work out of my office, and under my orders!"

"Naw," Kelly said slowly. "You couldn't be!"

"Couldn't be what?" Saint John fell into the trap.

"You couldn't be that important," Kelly answered bluntly. "No man could be, but that don't keep some from trying. Now get this straight, Saint John. I have my orders, and I'm taking none from you. Your office is local, and you've got plenty to do. Notify the Coroner; call the meat wagon; and make out your reports. Get those dead men off the street before they start drawing flies. That should keep you busy for quite a while, and satisfy even your sense of importance!"

"Don't try to tell me how to do my law-work!" Saint John bellowed. "I haven't seen your credentials, so get them out pronto, Mister!"

Kelly flipped back his white apron. A five-pointed badge was pinned to his vest. He reached into an inside pocket of his vest and produced a thin flat wallet. He opened it and laid it on the bar.

"Can you read?" he asked Saint John, dubiously. "No matter; there's my picture on my credentials. Give a look, big fella!"

Charley Compton watched and listened with interest. He glanced up and saw Ace Fleming watching him closely. Fleming jerked his head slightly, and Compton walked over to the bar. "You knew Kelly was a lawdog?"

Compton nodded. "He was, when I was a ranger," he answered. "Up here I didn't ask him any questions."

"How about you?" Fleming asked softly.

"I'm clean," Compton answered without hesitation. "No lawbadge."

"I could fix that quick enough," Saint John offered eagerly.

Compton shook his head. "I've got a job," he said.

"We better be getting back to the Circle F," Fleming interrupted, and they left the *Casino* and mounted their horses.

"Some of the boys are riding over to Dog Town soon," Fleming said grimly. "They might do it while we take showdown to the outlaws in the cave. Pug Jones will be busy, and he can't be in two places at one time; but don't mention it to Saint John."

## 11

PUG JONES sat in the office behind the *Red Rose* saloon. An expensive Stetson was pushed to the back of his nearly-bald head, a thick cigar clenched tightly between yellowed teeth. The twin six-shooters were tied low on his thick legs, and while he was without a coat, a bandolier of rifle cartridges was slung across his chest, resting on his right shoulder.

Three hard-faced strangers sat in chairs watching the man who had sent to Laredo for them. All were notorious gunfighters, jealous of each other and of Jones, but they had one thing in common. All were wanted by the law, and needed money for a getaway to some haven like South America.

"You saw my men when they high-tailed it back here from Vaca," Jones snarled at his hirelings.

"They just rode over there without a plan," one of the strangers remarked; "they got shot to ribbons."

"This time I have a plan," Jones said more quietly. "How many men did you boys bring up with you?"

"Nine, not counting us," Dude Fargo answered for his companions. "That makes twelve; how many have you left, Pug?"

"Ten I can count on," Jones replied. "Now here's the set-up. The Syndicate wants that land grant; it's supposed to be with the old Vallejo treasure. We get the loot, and all they want is that landgrant."

"So to hell with Vaca town," Dude

Fargo said callously. "Let's wipe out your old friend Demingway, and get the treasure!"

"You're new in these parts, Dude," Jones said quietly. "Demingway has quite a gang, and they also have a map telling where the treasure is buried. They plan to get it and light a shuck by way of Saint George, Utah. We'll hit them from that end; I have an idea the law will bottle Demingway up from this end."

"So we'll have Demingway in the middle," Fargo said with a smile. "When are we riding?"

"Within an hour," Jones said coldly. "I've sent pack-horses ahead with provisions and extra ammunition. We will circle north above the cave, and hit them from a pass they will have to use to make a getaway!"

It was midnight when the four men left the *Red Rose* to walk to the big livery stable. A group of roughly-dressed men were lounging inside the barn. They looked Pug Jones over with interest, and the boss of Dog Town studied each man carefully.

"I've got one change of fresh horses," he said to Fargo. "I'll have a couple of the boys bring these other horses along slowly. We might need them after the fight, just in case any of those Demingway owlhooters slip out of the trap."

He hunkered down on his bootheels in front of the group. He talked low and earnestly for ten minutes, and he was not interrupted. When he had finished he stretched erect and turned to Dude Fargo.

"You take charge of your own men, Dude. It will take a couple of hours to get across the ridge and down into position. We'll hit that camp just before daylight, Injun-style."

"They've had a day and a half to find the treasure," Fargo said slowly. "What if they didn't find it?"

"They've found it," Jones said, confidently. "Cuchillo Lopez saw the map, and it was marked as plain as the nose on your face."

It was evident that the oldtimers in Dog Town had told the strangers about the treasure, the law in the Strip, and Lost River Cave. They mounted their fresh horses at a word from Pug Jones, and rode out of Dog Town, twenty-three strong. Every man was armed with rifle and sixshooters, with extra cartridges in the pockets of their brush coats. Most of them had been drinking the free whiskey furnished by Jones, but there was no shouting or revelry.

"They've been on the dodge too long to act like pilgrims," Fargo said to Jones. "You bend the lead from here; his graze all looks alike to me."

PUG JONES was a big man; he sat his saddle with a deep seat, his rifle across his knees. He took the lead and rode across the rangeland at a dogtrot, keeping to the brush to avoid being skylined, and setting a course west by north. After a time, they left the foothills and began a steady climb which took them about the highest reach of Lost River Cave. Only the soft chime of spurs and the creak of saddle-leather told of their passing, but when they had gone, a lone rider left a spur of rocks which served for a look-out peak.

Pug Jones led his party down a gradual slope and called for a halt in a grassy flat near a brawling stream. He glanced at Dude Fargo and spoke gruffly.

"Back of us is the trail to Utah," he explained. "Up in front is the west entrance to Lost River Cave. Put the horses under a guard and get ready for the fight. We're going into the tun-

nel if we can make it; if we can't, we'll blast our way inside!"

"Is this Lost River?" Fargo asked curiously.

Jones nodded. "It gets lost underground, where it runs through the cave," he explained. "If we get inside before daylight, be careful; some of those drops are better than a hundred feet."

Only the fading starlight gave enough illumination to distinguish the rocky banks of the little river as the men followed Jones and Fargo toward the west entrance to the tunnel. Jones sent one of his men ahead to reconnoiter, and five minutes later they heard the flat bark of a rifle.

"Let's get up there," Jones whispered. "Keep to cover, and don't let a man escape!"

Jones cursed softly when his scout failed to return. They found the man sprawled in the trailside bracken with a bullet through the head. Pug Jones stared at the dead man, his swarthy face convulsed with rage.

"They know we're here now," he growled, and then he faced the forbidding entrance to the tunnel. "Every man cut loose a full magazine right into that tunnel!" he ordered. "Then reload and get ready to charge!"

Twenty man laid down a withering blast of fire, emptying their rifles as fast as they could pull trigger and work the levers. No answering volley came from the cave, and sweating hands worked feverishly to reload as the echoes rattled back from the rimrock high above. Pug Jones was the first man in the trail as he gave the order to attack. "Follow me, you rannies; a man can't die but one time!"

Dude Fargo led his own men a little to the right. Pug Jones came charging from the left with his Dog Town fighters. An oppressive silence beat down after the furious barrage of rifle-fire. The silence was broken when a dozen rifles answered from the tunnel when the raiders were fifty yards from the entrance.

Four men went down under the hail of bullets, but the rest continued their mad charge. Now their rifles were barking savagely as Jones gave the order to seek cover.

The first fingers of dawn were plucking at the eastern sky as the rival outlaw-gangs blasted at each other until rifle-barrels grew too hot to hold. Pug Jones was crouching near Dude Fargo; he cocked his shaggy head to the side and listened intently.

"Firing from the east," he remarked with a hard, crooked smile. "That would be the law from Vaca."

"What law?" Fargo asked. "You mean that big deputy sheriff?"

"Him, and a jasper who used to tend bar for me in the *Silver Dollar*," Jones answered sullenly. "Hombre by the name of Tim Kelly; he's a deputy U. S. Marshal!"

"You never told me the outside law had moved in," Fargo said angrily.

"I only found out tonight," Jones growled. "Let's move up closer, before the light gets too strong. Chances are Demingway will have to pull some of his men back to fight the law. He's like a prairie-dog trying to watch two holes at the same time!"

THE LIGHT faded to signal the end of the brief false-dawn. Three men were inside the tunnel when the sun slanted over the eastern mountain some five minutes later. One of the three was Pug Jones. His rifle barked when a head raised up from behind a limestone rock. The man screamed and fell to the worn trail, and three more slugs crashed into his body to bring him a quick and merciful death.

Rifles began to answer from the dark interior of the long tunnel, and a man behind Jones gasped to tell of a mortal wound. Another man took his place as the Dog Town men wormed their way through the darkness. A snarling voice rose above the blasting of the rifles. "Get out or get killed, Jones. Cord Demingway talking!"

Pug Jones triggered his rifle at the direction from which the voice had

sounded. "Go to hell!" he answered. "You're in a tight, Demingway!"

Rifles blasted to answer his challenge, and the damp air of the cave was heavy with the fumes of burning powder. The battle settled down to a sniping duel, with neither force being able to see the other.

Cord Demingway left four men to hold back the Dog Town raiders. He made his way along the twisting tunnel to the east end, where five men were engaging the forces from Vaca. He faced the large opening to the cave, his face twisted with rage.

Back in the cave in a line with the opening, he could see a great pile of dirt. Picks and shovels were lying near a large deep hole where they had been dropped at the first alarm given by the outside lookout.

"Damn 'em!" Demingway croaked hoarsely. "Another two hours, and we would have had the loot and been gone!"

"We didn't find any loot, boss," a bearded outlaw said sullenly. "We dug down ten feet like that old map said, and all we hit was some old rotting timbers those old Spaniards used to shore up the diggings; somebody else must have beat us to it!"

"We didn't dig deep enough!" Demingway raged. "Now they've got us boxed in here like gophers, with both ends blocked off!"

"I know a way," Demingway said slowly. "Hold them back, and watch that lower trail!"

He slid back into the deeper darkness near the deep hole his men had dug. Using the pile of dirt for a ladder, the outlaw climbed to a ledge about six feet above the floor of the cave. He moved back until he touched a damp wall of rock, and then Demingway began to climb slowly in the stygian darkness.

THIS WAS the old chimney of Lost River Cave, found by Gospel Cummings some five years previous, during a bear-hunt. It was no longer a secret; every one in Vaca knew of the chimney entrance where only one man could crawl through at a time. Now it was used by the thousands of bats which lived in the cave; most of them had returned from their nocturnal hunting.

Cord Demingway made his way slowly upward, using the rocky sides of the chimney for footing. He paused when he saw a faint light above him; held his breath while he listened intently.

He could hear the faint explosions of guns from far down the trail, facing the front entrance to the cave. Then he started climbing again, stopping when his head was level with the top of the rocky chimney.

The minutes passed slowly while Demingway recovered his breath, and now he could hear every vagrant sound. Birds wre singing in the trees on the high slope; they would have been silent if any one was moving in the vicinity.

The tall outlaw pushed erect and climbed from the secret entrance. The first thing he did was twitch his twin sixshooters against holster crimp, after his long upward climb. A smile curled his lips as he turned to face the steep trail leading to the east. The smile froze instantly on the handsome outlaw's face.

"Howdy, Demingway," a deep voice greeted the outlaw. "Took you long enough to get here!"

"Swifty Matthews!" the answer came jerkily. "And you didn't grab a sneak!"

"I don't need a sneak," Matthews said quietly. "You're at the end of the trail, Demingway; looks like you were going to run out on your boys!"

"Damn you!" Demingway swore huskily. "You're on the dodge the same as me!"

"For killing your brother Joe, remember?" Matthews reminded.

Anger slows up the muscles, and for a moment Cord Demingway's eyes were almost closed. Swifty Matthews

waited with his right hand hooked in the belt above his holstered sixshooter. Then he spoke softly. "You didn't find the treasure, Cord. I'd have killed you if you had found it!"

Cord Demingway went into a crouch. Then he hesitated as curiosity got the better of him. "You'd have never known," he sneered.

"I was watching," Matthews said coldly. "I got down into the cave the same way you came up. I saw your men digging like slaves, and following every direction of that old map!"

"You're a liar!" Demingway spat savagely.

"Pass that for now," Matthews said with a shrug. "I was down there when the lookout at the west entrance saw one of Pug Jones' men sneaking up. Then the law began to shoot from this end. You took it on the run for the west entrance, and I came on up the chimney to wait. You satisfied now?"

"Sorry I called you out of your name," Demingway said promptly; "now it's between you and me."

"One minute," Matthews interrupted quickly. "You were heading for South America. Where did you cache the gold from that pocket your boys were working?"

Cord Demingway crouched with both hands poised above his holsters. "Mebbe you found the cache, too?" he suggested.

Matthews nodded slightly. "I found it; it belongs to Ace Fleming. Well?"

"All this talk must lead someplace," Demingway answered quickly. "Where?"

"You taken up for your brother, Joe," Matthews reminded softly. "I said Joe rubbed an Ace off the bottom of the deck, and he went for his iron first. You and him are cut from the same piece of cloth. Any time you are ready!"

"If you win, you've got nothing to lose," Demingway said craftily. "If I win, the gold won't do you any good. You moved it?"

Matthews nodded. "I moved it, about twenty-odd pounds!"

DEMINGWAY said quietly, "A little short of five thousand. Enough to get me a start in the Argentine. You want to play it that way."

"That's the way I figured it," Matthews admitted. "Just remember I had you under my gun twice, and I didn't shoot!"

"I'll remember," Demingway promised. "I've waited a long time to square up for Joe; I always knew I was the fastest!"

"Gun-proud," Matthews commented dryly. "I've got the same disease. I always knew I had you faded with an even break."

"Funny about that," Demingway said, thoughtfully. "What the oldtimers call the 'Code of old Judge Colt'. A man couldn't live with himself if he grabbed an edge; all he wants is a fair shake, and the devil take the hindmost!"

"That's right," Matthews agreed. "The shooting has stopped. It will start again soon. When it does, that's the go-ahead; the gold is under a rock on the other side of the chimney!"

Cord Demingway did not turn his head. A smile broke out on his bronzed face as he spread his boots for balance. While Swifty Matthews faced him fifteen paces away with his back to the east. Silence in the sun-drenched forest around them while each man strained his hearing for the... *"Go-ahead"*.

A sixshooter roared suddenly from not too far away. Both men were trained gunfighters, fast and deadly with the tools of their trade. Two right hands dipped down as though motivated by the same impulse; two shots roared out in a thunder of sound.

Swifty Matthews was jerked to the left and thrown to the ground as though struck by a mighty hammer. Cord Demingway took a quick step backward; then he went down with the smoking gun dropping from his nerveless hand. Silence for a moment, and then Swifty Matthews coughed and sat up weakly. He turned his head when the sound of boots scuffed behind him.

"Take it easy, Swifty!" a voice called hoarsely. "It's Skid Yancey!"

Swifty Matthews grunted and turned slowly to face the Circle F cowboy. "That was you who gave the go-ahead," he accused.

"That was me," Yancey admitted. "You both said all you wanted was a fair shake with no advantage on either side. You hurt bad?"

"Naw," Matthews answered weakly. "Broken left arm, is all. What about Demingway?"

"Boothill waits for that owlhooter," Yancey said, coldly; "he asked for it, and he had it coming."

"Judge not lest ye be also judged," a deep voice interrupted solemnly. "The wages of sin..."

"Boothill," Yancey finished dryly. "Better take a look at Swifty; he's shot in the left arm."

Gospel Cummings changed instantly. He ripped the sleeve of Matthews' shirt, dressed the wound simply, and helped the wounded man down to the horses. He boosted Matthews to the saddle. "Tell Charley not to worry about Demingway," he said, and rode down the trail to Vaca town and the doctor.

Yancey watched Cummings ride after Matthews, and then returned to the fight. He carried the slain outlaws' guns over his left arm, and Charley Compton recognized them instantly.

"Swifty Matthews did for Demingway," Yancey explained. "Swifty got a broken arm; him and Gospel rode back to town."

"Dog Town ought to be ashes by now," Compton said gruffly. "Cole Brighton and some of the cattlemen sent wagons to take the women to the railroad while Jones and his men were busy here. I'll get up there and tell Stingaree."

## 12

STINGAREE Burke crawled through the brush, and stopped beside Charley Compton, who was firing into the front entrance of the big cave. The old lawyer listened to the answering fire for a moment, and spoke, confidently. "Demingway don't have too many left," he commented.

"Demingway is dead," Compton answered curtly. "Swifty Matthews killed him, and got a broken left arm himself."

"I've been talking to Skid Yancey," the old lawyer said. "Sooner or later, Pug Jones will be in command of the cave; we ought to be there to protect our interests."

"You mean down the chimney?" Compton asked.

"That's what I mean. We know about that secret entrance, but I don't believe Jones does. Want to take a chance?"

"The three of us," Compton agreed promptly. "You and me, and Skid Yancey. Pass the word to Skid. I'll talk to Ace Fleming."

Burke withdrew into the deeper bracken, and Compton made his way to a fort of rocks where Fleming was directing his Circle F men. The gambler listened while Compton outlined

his plan. Fleming frowned, and then nodded in agreement. "A man has to take chances," he said with his usual fatalism. "How will we know when to charge in?"

"Three fast shots in a row," Compton suggested. "We are getting close."

"Good luck, and watch yourself," Fleming answered. "Our losses, so far, have been light."

Compton crawled away and met Yancey and Burke at a bend in the rocky trail. Skid Yancey shucked his spurs, tightened his belt, and led the way up the steep trail. He paused at the place from where he had watched the duel between Demingway and Matthews.

"I'll take the lead down the chimney," he whispered. "We take it slow so as not to make any noise. There are little shelves of rock for a man to stand on. The place stinks of bats, but they won't hurt a man. If we make any noise, there might be a committee waiting for us when we step on the shelf down below."

"Bend the lead," Compton said tersely. "I'll be right after you, and Stingaree will follow me."

Yancey climbed the last twenty yards to the top of the stone chimney. He hoisted his legs up and into the hole, disappeared from sight, and Compton followed him.

Charley Compton could hear the slither of Yancey's rough clothing against the sides of the chimney. He felt with each boot until he found a little rocky ledge, and then lowered the other foot. The light faded at the top; the stench of bat-guano was stifling. Compton knew then that Burke had also entered the chimney, and was shutting off some of the precious air.

He worked his way down for what seemed an interminable time. A hand touched his leg lightly. A voice whispered softly close to his ear. "Duck down, and step to the left. We are on the shelf!"

Compton crouched, stepped to the left, and then he saw Yancey. The Circle F cowboy told him to warn Stingaree Burke, and Compton waited for the old lawyer to reach the shelf. A moment later, the three men were huddled on the wide shelf above the floor of Lost River Cave. Occasionally a rifle would wink out from the darkness, and the roaring explosions echoed back from the high limestone walls.

Charley Compton waited until his eyes had become accustomed to the semi-gloom of the big cave. It was bright out toward the entrance, and two men were crouching behind huge stalgamites. The limestone pillars glittered like diamonds, and Compton saw them in countless numbers leading back into the dark forbidding recesses of the huge cave.

HE LEANED forward and stared at a great pile of dirt on the floor beneath the shelf on which they rested. Stingaree Burke was also staring at the deep hole; he moved closer to Compton. "The treasure?" he whispered.

"That's the location," Compton answered; "they didn't find the treasure."

"You knew they wouldn't," Burke whispered.

"Only two Demingway men left at this end," Compton changed the subject.

"We could get them like shooting fish in a barrel," Yancey said eagerly. "You take the one on the right; I'll rub out the one on the left."

"Hold it," Compton said quickly. "We'd give our position away, and I hear shooting from deep in the cave."

Silence for some minutes, broken only when a shot came from outside, and was answered by one of the outlaws at the mouth of the cave.

"Look yonder!" Yancey whispered hoarsely. "Three men sneaking up from the west end!"

"Those hombres in front should have warning," Compton grunted.

He picked up a clod, drew back his arm, and threw the clod across

the cave. Both men whirled just as the three men coming from the west opened fire. One of the defenders went down, but he continued to fire his rifle from the floor.

"One of those three is Pug Jones!" Yancey whispered to Compton. "And he just lost a man!"

They could make out the squat figure of Jones outlined against the faint light from the lower end of the cave. The Dog Town outlaw fined his sights and pressed trigger. The man at the front of the cave, pitched to the limestone floor, his hot rifle falling from his grimy hands. His partner fired a shot, and a gasping gurgle came from back in the gloom. Then Pug Jones closed the battle with a final shot which silenced the wounded outlaw at the front of the cave.

"Let's get down there," Compton whispered. "Keep behind cover, but leave Jones to me. You two guard that west tunnel, in case some of his men find their way up here!"

He stepped to the pile of dirt and slid to the floor of the cave, followed by Bruke and Yancey. All found refuge behind limestone pillars, watching for Pug Jones to come into the light.

Boots scuffed softly on the smooth floor, and a moment later the huge form of Pug Jones stepped into the light. He almost ran to the hole which the Deimingway outlaws had dug. He carefully placed his rifle against a stalactite, went to his knees, and peered into the deep excavation.

"I better tell the boys," he said to himself, and pushed up to his feet.

"Better tell me first," Charley Compton spoke suddenly. "Don't reach for your hardware!"

"Compton!" the outlaw gasped, and then he saw Charley standing in the clear, watching him closely. He also saw that Compton was empty-handed, and Jones swelled his big chest. "So you joined up with Cord Demingway," he sneered.

"Demingway is dead," Compton said grimly. "You and your men are surrounded, what's left of you. I'm giving you a chance to surrender!"

"You're giving me a chance?" Jones laughed raucously.

"Dog Town is burned to the ground," Compton said quietly; "Demingway is dead. Who's the head man in the Syndicate?"

"How did you get in here?" Jones countered.

"Down the chimney; you evidently never heard about that one!"

"My men will be up here soon," Jones warned. "Now, I'll make you a proposition. Where's the Vallejo treasure?"

"There's the hole yonder," Compton answered. "They didn't find anything."

"I'll give you a cut," Jones offered. "One fourth if you find the treasure!"

"That treasure belongs to the heirs of old Don Alvarado Vallejo," Compton said simply.

"Finders keepers, I always say," Jones declared. "One fourth, and your life!"

"I've got my life," Compton said slowly.

JONES JERKED up when two rifles boomed in the tunnel behind him. They were answered by a return from farther to the west, and Compton smiled grimly. "If you were stalling for time, you can get down to cases now," he stated. "Your men will never get into the cave!"

"I'm giving you one more chance," Jones said arrogantly. "Throw in with me, find the treasure, and take a third!"

"No dice," Compton answered slowly. "Who's top man in the Syndicate?"

"I am," Jones answered proudly. "And I can find the treasure now without any help from you!"

"Demingway didn't find it," Compton pointed out. "And he had the original map."

He was watching Pug Jones intently. Jones had both big hands hooked into his gunbelts above the sixshooters in his twin holsters. Compton studied the thick-splatted fingers; shifted his gaze to the burly outlaw's face. He saw the fine spray of wrinkles wink out at the corners of the killer's mean little eyes. This was the go-ahead!

Compton dipped his right hand down and up, curling the hammer of his sixshooter back on the draw. Orange flame blasted from the muzzle of his leaping gun, followed almost instantly by a stuttering explosion as Jones drew and fired.

The two men faced each other across the open pit, and then Compton stood there alone. A sudden thump came from the deep hole; then all was still.

Charley Compton sighed and pointed his smoking gun at the floor. He triggered off three rapid shots, put his hammer on half-cock, and ejected the spent sheels from his .45 Colt. Then he reloaded and holstered the smoke-grimed weapon deep in leather.

He was waiting at the cave entrance, but keeping behind cover when Ace Fleming hailed him from down the trail. "That you, Charley?"

"Come on up!" Compton shouted. "All clear at this end!"

Ace Fleming came running up the trail with six men. They crowded into the cave around Compton who warned them to stay close to the walls.

"Stingaree and Yancey are holding the west tunnel," he explained. "Some of the Jones gang are still making a fight."

"Jones?" Fleming asked. "We heard pistol-shots!"

"That pile of dirt back yonder," Compton said quietly. "Jones fell into that hole. He was looking for the treasure!"

"Listen!" Fleming cautioned. "I hear Stingaree Burke talking!"

"You Laredo men!" the voice of the old lawyer bellowed. "You better get out while you can. Pug Jones is dead, and most of his men; the law will close in on you at sundown!"

"We should have sent some men around to block that Saint George trail," Fleming said regretfully.

"We'll clear out," a muffled voice came faintly from down the dark tunnel, and then all was silent.

STINGAREE BURKE came into the light with his rifle at the ready. He slipped behind a limestone pillar when he saw the group of men in the cave. He emerged again when he recognized Fleming and the Circle F men.

"Howdy, Ace," he greeted the gambler quietly. "How many men did we lose?"

"Three wounded," Fleming answered gratefully. "Who did for these hombres here in the cave?"

"Pug Jones and his men," Compton answered. He turned to Burke and said: "I found out who was the head of the Syndicate!"

"Give him a name!" the old lawyer pleaded. "Some hombre from down Laredo way?"

"His name was Pug Jones," Compton replied; "he told me so, just before he made his play."

"Where in hell is he?" Yancey asked, as he came from the tunnel.

"In that deep hole yonder. That's as close to the treasure as he ever got."

"Did they find it?" Burke asked eagerly.

"Let's make a pine torch and take a look," Compton suggested.

He went to a pile of rocks the out-

laws had used for a fireplace. Compton chose a stub of pitch-pine, splintered it with the blade of his stock knife, and struck a match. With the torch blazing, he led the way to the deep hole and leaned over to peer down into the depths. The other men watched from both sides of the cave; they saw the huge bulk of Pug Jones lying motionless at the bottom.

"They cut notches in the side for a ladder," Compton said, as he pointed to a series of holes at one end of the deep hole. "I'm going down!"

Fleming took the torch while Compton climbed down into the pit. They watched as Compton took the torch and examined all sides of the excavation. The hole was about ten feet long, nearly as wide, and ten feet deep.

"What do you make of it, Charley?" Fleming asked eagerly.

"We ought to have a couple of ropes to get Jones out of here," Compton answered. "All I can see is some rotted timbers." He reached down and picked a piece of rusty metal from the side of the hole.

"What's that?" Yancey asked.

"Burro shoe, what's left of it after a hundred years," Compton answered. "Now we know how they packed the treasure up here."

He stuck the blazing torch in a crevice and climbed out of the hole. He looked about for Stingaree Burke, and the old lawyer came into the front of the cave. He was smiling eagerly, and holding something in his hand.

"I just went up to visit the late Cord Demingway," he explained. "I found him where Matthews let him lay, and I also found this in that outlaw's pocket. Looks like a map!"

He was watching the face of Charley Compton as he spoke. Compton nodded his head with a little sigh.

"That's the map they stole from me," he admitted. "The original map, drawn by old Don Alvarado Vallejo."

"Then all we have to do is read the map," Burke declared. "The writing is in Spanish, but I can make it out."

"How does it read?" Fleming asked with interest.

"Well, it tells how to get to Lost River Cave," Burke answered; "so we don't have to bother with that. Now here we are inside the cave. It indicates three heavy pillars of limestone, and a wide shelf across the top. That would be where we came down from the chimney."

Charley Compton remained silent. He was watching Burke with a little smile framing his mouth. The old lawyer bent closer, and continued to read the map.

"Between the two end pillars," he read slowly. "Twenty-two paces from mouth of cave, due east and west."

HE PUT A heel at the edge of the pit, paced slowly to the entrance of the cave, counting slowly. Then he retraced his steps, still counting.

"Cord Demingway had it right," he muttered. "The map says ten feet down; they got down about that far."

Stingaree Burke climbed down into the pit and measured up with his hands. "A bit more than ten feet," he said slowly. "Either they found the treasure, or some hunter beat them to it!"

"If the treasure was ten feet down, it should be right under your feet," Fleming interrupted. "It would start at about ten feet. Some of you boys climb down there and start to digging!"

Three cowboys climbed into the hole and started digging. Charley Compton watched them work, but he made no move to join them. Stingaree Burke touched him on the arm and spoke in a low voice.

"What do you think, Charley? You know what this means to Mona Belle."

"Yeah, I know," Compton answered wearily. "Mebbe we didn't read that map just right. This is a big cave, and we know there is another entrance

down at the west end of the tunnel."

"It would be dangerous to go down there right now," Burke objected. "Some of those Laredo owlhooters might be hanging around; they'd pick us off from the brush, or hide behind one of those limestone pillars."

"That treasure has been buried a hundred years," Compton said slowly. "A day or so more won't matter much. I'm thinking about the dead men that must be lying down there. What about them?"

"We will notify Saint John," Burke said brusquely. "Old Gospel will be busy for a while, if they pack all those owlhooters back to Hell's Half Acre."

"They wiped each other out, those outlaws," Compton said slowly. "And by now Dog Town should be burned to the ground."

"The treasure," Burke insisted. "Seems to me you'd show more interest."

"What do you want me to do?" Compton asked irritably. "I've worked on this puzzle day and night. We can look some more after we all get some rest. We know the outlaws didn't pack it out, so it must be here somewhere!"

"I reckon you're right, rod," Burke agreed.

"What did you say?" Compton asked.

"Wasn't you ramrod of the Vallejo Rancho?" Burke asked testily. "You still are, if we prove ownership to the land!"

"Mebbe so; mebbe not," Compton answered curtly. "Mona Belle is the boss, and right now she is looking after Swifty Matthews!"

A slow smile began to spread across the old lawyer's smooth face. "So that's what is eating on your innards," he said slowly. "You're out here hunting for the treasure, while Swifty is down with his head under him, back on the Circle F."

"I didn't say so!" Compton flared.

"You did, but not in so many words," Burke argued. "Trouble with you is you lack for nerve, rod," he continued. "Oh, I know you can face a fast gunhawk and never bat an eye. But with women you get tongue-tied and all bogged down. Faint heart never won fair lady yet, and it won't ever be any different."

"Thanks for the advice from counsel," Compton answered tartly. "I'll give what you said some thought."

"You do that, cowboy," Burke urged. "You've got more than an even chance the way I see it. What more do you want?"

"Listen to those shovel-cowboys dig," Compton changed the subject, and they walked back to the pit. He looked down and watched the sweating cowboys swing picks and shovels. One of them yelled and stooped to pick up a glittering object.

"We've struck it!" he shouted. "It's a gold piece!"

Stingaree Burke climbed down in the pit and took the gold piece from the excited cowboy. The lawyer held the coin under the torch and swore softly under his breath.

"This is a twenty-dollar gold piece," he said scornfully. "Minted at Denver in the year 1883!"

"One of the outlaws must have dropped it out of his pocket," Compton suggested. "I'm heading back for the Circle F!"

"Tell Sandra I'll be home by dark," Ace Fleming called. "I know you are

worried about your pard, Swifty Matthews."

"That was the wrong thing to say," Burke told the gambler in a whisper. "Charley is jealous of Swifty; he's so jealous that he can't keep his mind on the treasure."

"So we'll keep on digging," Fleming said dryly. "Let's spell those boys down there."

"We better take time out to eat our meat sandwiches old Foo put up for us," Burke suggested. "Then we can start digging again."

CHARLEY COMPTON left the cave and walked out into the bright sunlight. He headed down the steep trail, rounded a bend, and came to a bosque where Shorty Benson was guarding the horses.

"Did you find the loot?" Benson asked eagerly.

Compton shook his head. "One of the boys found a gold-piece down in the hole," he answered. "Minted not many years ago, but they are still digging. I'm heading back for the Circle F."

"I'll be damned!" Benson muttered, as Compton climbed his saddle and headed east. "He don't seem very interested."

Charley Compton rode slowly, rolled a cigarette, and lighted his smoke. He inhaled deeply, and then a broad smile appeared on his bronzed face. After finishing his smoke, he reached to his saddlebags behind the cantle, and drew out a thick meat sandwich. He munched it slowly as he rode along, still smiling with obvious enjoyment. He rode into the Circle F yard about two in the afternoon, stripped his riding gear, and turned his horse into a corral. Mona Belle called from the big house, and Compton hurried to her side.

"How's Swifty?" he asked softly.

"The doctor left not more than twenty minutes ago," the girl answered. "Swifty is sleeping now. What happened back there, Charley?"

"Most of the outlaws are dead," Compton explained. "Stingaree gave the rest a chance to light out for Utah."

"Pug Jones?" the girl asked hesitantly.

"He's dead," Compton answered gruffly; "I gave him a chance to surrender!"

Mona Belle asked no more questions. She knew the answers now as far as Demingway and Jones were concerned. Swifty Matthews had killed one of the leaders; Charley Compton had killed the other.

"The treasure?" she whispered. "Did they find it?"

Compton slowly shook his head. "I don't believe they are digging in the right place," he said quietly. "I was too tired to argue. Like I told Stingaree; that treasure has been there for a hundred years. A day or two more won't matter much."

Mona Belle watched his face closely. "That isn't like you, Charley," she said slowly. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Charley Compton glanced around the big yard. He was about to speak when Sandra Fleming came out of the house. Compton gave her Fleming's message, and Mona Belle seemed disappointed.

"You were saying, Charley?" she prompted.

"Some other time," Compton said irritably. "Now I'm going to wash and change clothes; I'll be in to see Swifty when he wakes up."

Mona Belle watched him stalk off to the bunkhouse. "Proud, stubborn fool," she said, and her teeth were clenched.

"All men are," Sandra Fleming said soothingly. "But I've learned one thing, Mona Belle. After a gunfight, a man takes quite a while to get back to normal. Ace was always like that, so I just wait until he has adjusted himself."

"Do you think that could be it?" Mona Belle asked hopefully.

"I'm sure of it," Sandra assured the worried girl. "Swifty Matthews is in love with you...too," she said quietly.

Mona Belle turned quickly. "You're just guessing," she answered tartly.

"I'm a woman," Sandra retorted. "I am married to Ace Fleming one of the finest men I had ever known. He and Charley are much alike in many ways."

"Yes," Mona Belle said with a sigh. "Both are gunproud!"

"It is Charley you love," Sandra said softly.

"I didn't say I was!"

"You will be a very wealthy girl," Sandra continued: "That might make Charley tongue-tied."

"I won't have a thing unless the old land grant is found," Mona Belle said worriedly. Then she began to smile. "I hope they don't find it," she said quietly. "Then I won't be a very wealthy girl."

"You are beautiful, Mona," Sandra said sincerely. "Mona Belle Compton," she repeated very quietly. "It sounds kinda nice!"

"Please don't tease me now, Sandra," Mona Belle pleaded tearfully. "But I wish something would happen to pound some sense into that jug-headed cowboy!"

"Perhaps something will," Sandra said. "There's Gospel Cummings waiting to talk to Charley."

Compton frowned when Cummings called to him. "Demingway and Jones are dead," he said shortly. "They didn't find the treasure. I was worried about Swifty."

"Cheer up," Cummings answered. "Swifty will move back to the bunkhouse tomorrow."

"Mona Belle will be wealthy," Compton said.

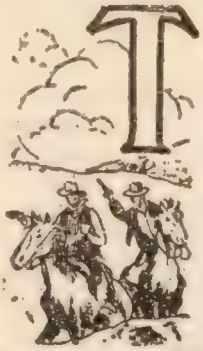
"She won't be, unless she gets the ranch back."

"She will get it back," Compton declared positively. "I am riding back to Lost River with Mona Belle after breakfast tomorrow."

"I'll ride with you," Cummings suggested.

"Have it your way," Compton answered with a shrug. "Now I'm going to wash up after crawling through that bat-hole."

## 13



THE LAW rode into the Circle F yard, followed by a heavy wagon with a flat bed. John Saint John and Tim Kelly dismounted and off-saddled. Long Tom Brady tooled his four-horse hitch close to the house where Ace Fleming maintained his office. Charley Compton joined the two lawmen as they went to join Brady.

"We brought the effects of Pug Jones," Kelly explained to Compton.

"The late Pug Jones," Compton corrected. "He wouldn't surrender when I gave him a chance. Cord Demingway is likewise; Swifty Matthews is in the house with a broken left arm."

He told the story of the battle at Lost River Cave, briefly. Tim Kelly seemed satisfied, but Saint John of-

fered the usual protests about the sovereignty of the law, as represented by himself. Kelly shrugged, and pointed to the gear on the flat-bed. "Let's carry this stuff into Fleming's office. It should furnish several more pieces to that puzzle we have been working on."

"That safe," Compton said slowly. "Must weigh all of five hundred pounds."

"The four of us can handle it," Kelly answered; "it belonged to Jones, and we should find the combination among his effects."

Tom Brady had found two heavy stakes which he slipped under the safe between the legs. With two men on each side, they carried it into the office and deposited it in one corner.

"Jones was the head of the Syndicate," Compton told Kelly. "You should find the names of his associates among his papers."

"I found some of them," Kelly replied. "The big wheel seems to be John Fargo, more familiarly known as Dude. He was likewise one of the witnesses against Swifty Matthews in that shooting case down at Laredo."

"I know the gent," Compton said with a nod. "He claimed that the Vallejo Rancho was in the Public Domain, and a lot of his gang filed homesteads on the lower end of the ranch along the Rio Grande."

"The Land Commissioner is looking into that," Kelly said slowly. "If we could find that old land grant, all those claims would be automatically nullified."

"You won't need me here, but I'll be around if you want me later," Compton said, and he left the office.

Mona Belle was waiting on the big front porch, and she beckoned for Compton to join her. She wore a tight-fitting gauzy dress with a low bodice, and her dark hair was piled high on her head, and topped off with a beautiful old Spanish comb.

"Swifty is awake," she said in a low voice; "he's asking for you, Charley."

"I'll go right in," Compton answered. "About the treasure; will you ride over with us early in the morning?"

"Us? Who else is going?" the girl asked, and her face showed her disappointment.

"It got rather involved," Compton explained. "Gospel Cummings invited himself and Ace. Then there will be the law and Stingaree. We will leave right after breakfast."

"What was all that stuff you were unloading from the wagon?" Mona Belle asked curiously. "From Dog Town, wasn't it?"

Compton nodded. "The personal effects of the late Pug Jones," he told the girl. "Tim Kelly will go through the papers, and he expects to find the combination to the safe."

"I feel that we are getting close," Mona Belle whispered. "And I have the feeling that we would be even closer if you told all you know?"

"Which I will in due time," Compton promised seriously.

"Don Alvarado Vallejo was my great-grandfather on my mother's side," Mona Belle said musingly. "At one time, there were twenty thousand head of cattle grazing on the Box V. It was almost a little town by itself, with forty families living there, and working on the Hacienda."

"Don Alvarado was very wealthy," Compton agreed. "We found out this much. They used a back-train of burros or mules to carry the treasure up here during that early revolution. We found a piece of a rusty shoe in the pit."

Mona Belle showed her excitement. She seized Compton's right hand and held it tight. "That close," she whispered. The light faded from her dark eyes as she leaned closer to Compton. "I am not sure that I want to be wealthy," she said with a little pout.

Charley Compton tightened his jaws. and then his left arm went around her slim waist. Mona Belle smiled and leaned against the strength of his deep chest. The door opened and San-

dra Fleming beckoned to Mona Belle.

"Swifty is asking for you and Charley," she called.

Mona Belle sighed as Compton dropped his arm. "Let us go in," she said in a low voice. "There will be another time."

THE BROODING expression left Compton's face. He was smiling as he greeted Sandra Fleming, and he stooped and opened his arms when little Deloise ran out to meet him.

"Sugar-Foots!" he whispered, and kissed her cheek. "Did I ever tell you how much I love you?" he asked softly. "Did I ever tell you how many times I've started to tell you how beautiful you are?"

While Compton was talking to the little girl, his eyes were looking deep into the dark eyes of Mona Belle. He was not tongue-tied with Deloise, and Mona Belle smiled as though she understood.

"Kiss me, Cholly," the little girl demanded imperiously. "I love you too, and I want you to hold me tight forever and ever."

"Out of the mouths of babes," Mona Belle whispered, just loud enough for Compton to hear. "I'll bet she tells that to all the handsome cowboys."

"I do not," Deloise contradicted. "Just Gospel, my Daddy, and Cholly. Does he ever kiss you, Mona?"

"Deloise!" her mother said sharply. "You ask too many questions!"

Sandra Fleming entered the house, followed by Mona Belle and Compton. Swifty Matthews was lying on a low bed in a side room. His left arm was in a splinted bandage, and his face was pale from loss of blood.

"Howdy, Charley," he greeted Compton. "Congratulations on a better job than I did; you didn't get hurt?"

"Not a scratch," Compton answered with a smile. "The law got back from Dog Town, and they brought all of the head man's effects here with them."

"Did they bring that little safe?" Matthews asked.

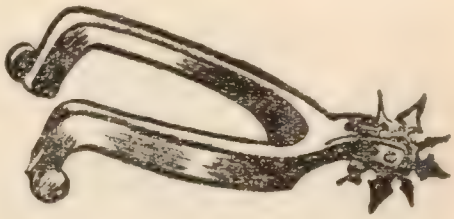
"It took four of us to carry it from the wagon," Compton answered. "Tim Kelly says that a lot of those witnesses against you down at Laredo were members of the Jones gang. It should mean acquittal for you on that old charge."

"Then I can come out of the brush again," Matthews said with a wan smile. "What about the treasure?"

"We didn't find it," Compton explained. "I have a hunch they were digging in the wrong place."

"I saw that pit," Compton said thoughtfully. "It was right under the shelf facing the entrance to the cave."

"Ace and Stingaree are digging back there right now," Compton said lightly. "Unless they gave it up for today."



He paused as voices sounded outside. Ace Fleming came into the house with Stingaree Burke, and their clothing was dirty from digging. Burke appeared tired as he followed Fleming to the sick room.

"Did you find it?" Matthews asked eagerly.

"See what I told you, Ace?" Burke asked. "You can't kill a Texas cowboy unless you cut off his head and hide it from him. How you feeling, Swifty?"

"Never felt better in my life," Matthews lied gamely. "Thanks to Gospel Cummings, and Doc Craig. What about the treasure?"

"We went down another six feet," Burke answered with a sigh. "It's my belief that someone got there ahead of us; people have been searching for the Vallejo treasure for more than seventy years."

"We've got to find it," Matthews said grimly. "Or the Rancho Vallejo will be opened to Public Domain!"

Mona Belle nudged Compton. She smiled when he glanced at her, and he noticed how even were her little white teeth.

"It didn't seem to me like that earth had been disturbed recently," Fleming remarked.

"We will keep on looking if we have to dig up the entire cave," Stingaree Burke announced. "It's got to be twenty-paces from someplace in that cave, and ten feet down!"

"You've got a date," Compton said quietly. "You and Ace; Mona Belle and me; Old Gospel and Saint John," he continued. "We will ride over there right after breakfast in the morning."

"I saw Tim Kelly outside," Fleming said. "He brought all the stuff over from Dog Town before they put the town to the torch. Has that got anything to do with his trip to the cave?"

COMPTON slowly shook his head. "I've just got a hunch," he answered stubbornly. "According to old Jose Morales, the landgrant was wrapped in oil silk, and sealed up in a small casket of sheet lead. It is much more valuable than all the treasure!"

"The treasure," Matthews said slowly. "Gold bullion and jewels; jewels worth a king's ransom—according to the old tales. Worth a quarter of a million."

"Mona Belle will be wealthy if we find the treasure," Fleming said emphatically.

Mona Belle sighed and excused herself. Charley saw her pretty face as she left the room; she did not seem happy about the treasure, and a frown creased his brow.

"Mona Belle cares little for money," Stingaree Burke said slowly. "But I never saw any one love a home the way she loves Rancho Vallejo. That great adobe house built by Don Alvarado more than a hundred years ago. She loves the people who were born and raised on the Hacienda as she was herself. Wealth will never spoil Mona Belle," he continued proudly, and he almost glared at Compton.

"Let's get over to the office and talk to the law," Ace Fleming suggested; "let these two old saddlepards visit for a while. Don't tire him out, Charley," he warned over his shoulder, as he and Burke left the sick room.

Charley Compton watched them go, and then sat down on a chair facing Matthews. They studied each other for a moment. Matthews was the first to speak. "That triangle, Charley; "I won't ever stop trying!"

Compton sat up straight, and his face darkened with a surge of anger which he quickly controlled. "I know," he said quietly. "It's like Gospel Cummings said that day in his cabin at Three Points."

"I dis-remember," Matthews protested. "What did he say?"

"Mona Belle would be the final voice," Compton reminded. "She was here with you alone," he added jealously.

"Not alone," Matthews corrected. "Doc Craig and Gospel Cummings were here most of the time. When they left, I was asleep from something Doc gave me. You were out there with her alone," he accused with a frown.

"Yeah, in broad daylight, and surrounded by people," Compton said gruffly. "You lost a lot of blood," he tried to change the subject.

"Blood," Matthews said with a shrug of his good shoulder. "I've got lots of blood, and the doc says I'll make up for what I lost in three days

or so. I'll take it kindly if you stay away from Mona Belle until I get back on my feet!"

"Sorry," Compton answered coldly, "but I've got other plans."

"Such as?"

"Such as riding back to Lost River to look for the treasure," Compton answered stiffly. "Not that it is any of your damn business," he added. "But if it will make you feel any better, Stingaree and Fleming will be along."

"That does make me feel better," Matthews admitted. "I wish there was some other way; I wish Mona Belle were twins!"

"We are both Texicans," Compton reminded. "Texans don't discuss a lady when she is not present."

"They do, when all they can say is good about her," Matthews replied heatedly. "You and I were always the best of friends. Now at times I almost hate you!"

"Likewise," Compton said gruffly. "I reckon that covers the subject, and I'll be shagging out to the bunkhouse."

"Sometimes I wish that shoot-out had been a draw between Demingway and me," Matthews muttered. "Then there would be no more triangle."

"I felt the same way about Pug Jones," Compton growled. "It only gave speed to my hand!"

"Yeah," Matthews agreed. "Likewise. I'll be seeing you around!"

COMPTON left the room and headed for the bunkhouse. He stopped when Fleming called from the office. Compton retraced his steps, stopped just inside the office where Tim Kelly was slowly working the combination on the Dog Town safe.

"We found the combination in some papers," Fleming whispered. "Kelly ought to have it open in a minute."

"Quiet," the deputy marshal growled. "Now I have to begin all over. Three to the right. Back to 12 at the left. 32 to the right. 46. Back to 3 at the left. I believe I have it!"

He turned the knob and then swung the heavy door back. Saint John leaned forward as Kelly drew out some folded papers. After a brief examination, Kelly spoke quietly.

"Seems to be a list of names in that Syndicate," he explained. "Most of them are wanted by the law, and quite a few of them are dead now. Wait a minute!"

He leaned forward to read a soiled paper. "This is to Pug Jones from Joe Demingway," he said slowly. "He was one of the Jones' gang, and he says here that he will kill Swifty Matthews in a card game. You know what that means?" he asked.

"It clears Swifty of that old charge down in Laredo," Fleming answered quickly. "What are those tally-sheets?"

"They seem to represent jags of cattle," Kelly answered. "And unless I am wrong, most of these cattle are grazing on the Box V right now. Two hundred head of Box B stuff, a hundred and fifty Circle F, and some odd brands they must have rustled here and there on the drive."

"What about money?" Fleming asked. "Jones was doing a good business over at Dog Town, and it should have been in cash."

Tim Kelly cleaned out the safe, and dumped books and papers on the floor. He reached to the back and brought out a dispatch case, pried off a small lock, and lifted the top. Several thick sheaths of currency were exposed, and some figures were marked on the paper bands.

"There is ten thousand dollars here, men," Kelly said slowly. "I will impound it to settle the debts of the estate. Such as compensation for rustled cattle, funeral expenses, and the like!"

"Which reminds me, Saint," Fleming said slowly. "We did part of your work for you. I sent a man to town to notify Boothill Crandall to pick up those outlaws."

"Well, thanks, and I take that kindly," Saint John answered.

"What about Swifty Matthews?" Fleming asked. "Is he still under arrest?"

"Technically—but it is just a matter of form," Kelly answered; "the case against him will be dismissed."

"If Dude Fargo is still alive, he should be halfway to Utah by now," Fleming suggested.

COMPTON excused himself and left the room. He went to the kitchen and begged Woo Fong for a piece of pie. The aged cook watched while Compton ate and asked: "When you get married, Cholly?"

"This is good pie," Compton grunted.

"Missy need good man to run Texas ranch," Foo Wong continued.

Sandra Fleming came into the kitchen, and Foo Wong went back to his stove. Sandra sat down and studied Compton's face. "Love can be cruel when it is stubborn," she said softly.

"I don't follow you," Compton muttered crossly.

"Most women would rather have happiness than wealth," Sandra continued.

"Naw you don't, Miss Sandra," Compton said quickly. "You're baiting a trap and hazing me into it. Mona Belle will get the ranch back."

"Do you mind if I tell her?" Sandra asked.

"Now, wait a minute," Compton protested. "I'm not sure, and neither are you!"

"There's a moon tonight," Sandra remarked; "if you lose Mona Belle, it serves you right!"

Compton watched her leave the kitchen. He walked outside just as Mona Belle came from the sick room. She came to Compton, her eyes filled with tears.

"I didn't want to hurt him, but he insisted on an answer," she said in a choked voice.

Compton's arms went about the girl, and he nudged her head back with his chin. "You told him...No," he whispered. "I love you, Mona Belle. We are both as poor as prairie dogs, but I'll work hard for you!"

"Is this a proposal?" Mona Belle whispered.

"I'm asking you to marry me," Compton answered fiercely.

"Before we go back to Texas?" Mona Belle asked anxiously.

"Anytime you name," Compton answered gently.

"You don't love Sugar-Foots any more," a voice wailed.

Compton dropped his arms, went to his knees, and took the little girl on his knee. "Sure I do, Sugar-Foots," he said soothingly. "Now give me a big hug and kiss."

"Will Mona Belle Compton get jelly?" the little girl asked.

"Now where in time did you hear that?" Compton asked.

"I heard Mona Belle saying it over and over in front of a mirror," Deloise answered.

Compton kissed her, stretched to his feet, winked as he tipped his hat to Mona Belle, and walked into the sick room. Matthews looked up gloomily.

"I know," he muttered. "Mona Belle told you."

"After you jumped the gun and tried your luck, I tried mine," Compton said quietly. "I wanted you to be the first to know; she will soon be Mrs. Mona Belle Compton!"

## 14

CHARLEY COMPTON awoke with the first early rays of the sun tugging at his eyelids. He dressed quietly, so as not to awaken the other sleepers in the bunkhouse. Stingaree Burke was already up and about on business of his own; he was splashing at the washbench behind the kitch-

en when Compton arrived to make his ablutions.

"You slept well," the old lawyer told Compton. "Like a man who has nothing on his conscience to disturb his slumbers."

"Perhaps I made excuses for myself," Compton answered with a smile. "What are you grinning about? You look like a cat full of cream."

"Son, I *feel* like a cat full of milk," Burke admitted frankly; "the news about the future Mrs. Charley Compton pleases me mightily. How in time did you unhobble your tongue long enough to declare your intentions?"

"I learn as I go along," Compton said quietly. "After Swifty tried to take a running start c. me, I sorta figured that 'Like begets like'. Things just built up and grew, and after I had spoken to Mona Belle, I knew I had been trying to do that very thing for three years."

"You've made me mighty happy, and taken a load off my mind, Charley," Burke said earnestly. "I'm getting on in years, and Mona Belle is my only kin. I don't have to ask; I *know* you will always think of her before yourself. You're a Texican, Charley."

"I did get to thinking some about Swifty," Compton admitted.

"Yeah, I know," Burke said shortly. "Like a small boy who says his prayers in bed. Halfway through he fell asleep."

"Keno," Compton admitted. "I just hope Mona Belle made a wise choice."

"Look whose riding in for grub," Burke whispered. "Gospel Cummings and the local law... Morning men."

"Howdy," Saint John answered the greeting. "The top of the morning to you both."

"Likewise," Compton said dryly. "Didn't you sleep well, Gospel?" he asked.

"I slept well, but not long enough," Cummings replied. "I hope you find the treasure of Vallejo today; it has cost enough lives."

"Mostly outlaws," Burke said carelessly. "Call it destiny, if you will; they coveted their neighbors' goods."

"You lifted that from context," Cummings reproved gravely. "There is another commandment to which men pay little heed."

"Yeah, I know," Saint John interrupted. "Thou shalt not kill!"

"Self-preservation is the first law of survival," Burke replied. "But these things are not for you or me to judge as you know, old friend... Good morning Mona Belle," he said suddenly.

Mona Belle Courtney stood in the kitchen doorway, dressed for the trails. She looked fresh and vitally alive, and very happy. Charley Compton dried his face and smiled at her over the top of the rough huck towel.

"Good morning, Mona," he said quietly. "If all these rough-tough cowboys were not present, I would tell you how radiant you look."

"Flatterer," the girl chided. "But I do feel better than I have in months. I feel that I have taken a very long journey, and am nearing the end of it."

"Pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow," Saint John said.

"Happiness," Mona Belle corrected. "An end to uncertainties and doubts."

"The beginning of a new life," Gospel Cummings added; "I know that you and Charley will be very happy."

Woo Fong appeared and announced that breakfast was ready. Ace Fleming came from the big house to have breakfast with the early risers. He sat at the head of the long table with

Compton at his left; Mona Belle at his right. Gospel Cummings lowered his head and asked the blessing, speaking humbly, and in a low deep voice.

Woo Fong brought hot plates of food, steaming stacks of hot cakes, and a huge pot of strong coffee. Now the talking stopped as the hungry riders attacked their ham and eggs. When the meal was finished, the aged Chinese stopped Charley Compton as he was leaving the kitchen.

"Good luck, Cholly," he said earnestly. "You be careful, please; you are not out of danger."

Compton stopped and searched the old cook's face. "What do you mean, Woo?" he asked.

"Me have hunch," Woo Fong said uneasily. "I feel danger from the dark; you be careful."

"I'll do that," Compton promised, and he slapped the old cook affectionately across the shoulders.

SHORTY BENSON and Tom Brady were saddling horses when the party approached the big solid barn. Stingaree Burke drew Benson aside and whispered to him; the stocky cowboy nodded vigorously. Each rider made sure of his saddlegear before mounting, a double-check which had become a daily habit with all who live in the saddle.

They left the Circle F yard at a walk just as the sun came up behind the distant Vermillion Cliffs. While no word had been spoken, Charley Compton rode in the lead with Mona Belle. "Fine-looking couple, and as fine as they look," Ace Fleming said to Stingaree Burke. "Nature is like that," he continued. "Leave it alone long enough, Nature will take its own course."

"We always realize that fact after it has happened," Burke said earnestly. "I feel ten years younger than I did when I rode up here to tend bar for the late Pug Jones."

"I'd like to know," Fleming said with a frown, "why you allowed Mona Belle to sing in the *Red Rose*."

"That puzzle we were speaking about," the old lawyer explained. "We had a few pieces to the puzzle. We knew that Jones was mixed up with a Syndicate; what we did not know was that he was the head man. We knew Cord Demingway was up here, looking for the treasure."

"Swifty Matthews," Fleming asked. "Where did he fit in?"

"Tim Kelly knew where Matthews was," Burke explained. "He could have arrested Swifty at any time, but knew that Matthews would not get a fair trial with all those lying witnesses parading against him."

"So you sent him up against Demingway," Fleming guessed.

"Partly," Burke admitted, "and partly to get in with Pug Jones. We figured that because Swifty was on the dodge, he would be accepted."

"He wasn't," Fleming said positively; "I knew that the day I saw him riding with you and Kelly."

"I heard of a plot to kill Swifty," Burke explained. "Two of the gang got drunk; I was serving them. I sent word to Swifty to stay out in the brush. You know the rest from there; we had to bring him in to the Circle F to keep him from getting drygulched."

ACE FLEMING rode up with Stingaree Burke, closely followed by Saint John and Gospel Cummings. Cummings glanced at the wheel tracks which stopped at the foot of the steep trail. He made no comment, but every one knew that those tracks had been made by the wagons of the dead; Boothill Crandall had wasted no time.

Cummings took the lead after tying his horse in a thicket of mesquite bushes where the beans hung thick

and well cured. John Saint John followed the gaunt plainsman with a rifle in his big blocky hands. Then came Mona Belle and Charley Compton, Fleming and Burke.

They entered the big cave and stood just inside for a time until their eyes had shed the bright sunlight. Mona Belle could hear the deep roaring murmur of the underground river which had given the huge cave its name. She came closer to Compton, and he put a protecting arm about her slim waist.

"Yonder is the shelf like an altar," he explained. "That pile of earth you see came from the pit Cord Demingway started. Up above the shelf is the chimney where the bats come and go, thousands of them."

Mona Belle shuddered. "And that is where you met Pug Jones," she whispered.

Ace Fleming watched Saint John with interest. He expected the big deputy to assert his authority and direct operations. Saint John looked at Charley Compton and spoke in a low, quiet voice. "It's your party from here on, Charley," he said slowly; "you give the orders, and we will carry them out."

Charley Compton stared at the big lawman. "Are you feeling well, Saint?" he asked solicitously.

"Never felt better in my life, and had less," Saint John answered with a smile. "Any day orders, rod?"

"Now I feel like I was back home on Rancho Vallejo," Compton said with a wide smile. "Saint and Gospel will go down in the pit with me to do the first digging. But before we start, we better study this old map some more."

"Study nothing," Ace Fleming declared flatly. "I studied that map so much I know it as well as you do, and you memorized every line, every dot and dash!"

"Right, especially the dots," Compton agreed. "But let's look at it anyway."

He hunkered down on his bootheels and spread the old worn map on the limestone floor. The others gathered about him, watching with interest. Charley Compton cleared his throat.

"We all know the directions to get here," he began. "We know that the map says the hiding-place is twenty-two paces north from the mouth of the cave to that shelf yonder. We know it lies between two limestone pillars at the base of the shelf."

"And we likewise know it says to dig down ten feet," Fleming said heavily.

"It doesn't say that," Compton contradicted quietly.

"I'll bet you...". Fleming trapped his lips on the unfinished sentence. "I never bet on the other man's game," he corrected himself. "But excuse me if I point; follow my finger and read it out loud slow."

HE LEANED over the map, established the points east and west, and stopped on a single line. *"10 ft. D N,"* he read aloud. "You can't make anything else out of it."

"I can," Charley Compton contradicted firmly. "Notice that what you take for *Down* is a capital D and a Capital N. I admit I made one little change; I took my penknife the night old Jose Morales died. There was a dot, or period, between the D and the N, and I carefully erased it with the point of my knife. Then I rubbed the place with the burnished part of my knife. That one line once read. '10 ft. *Due North!*' Not *down.*"

"I'll be damned!" Stingaree Burke ejaculated. "What are we waiting for?" he shouted.

"For strong backs and willing hearts," Compton said with a smile, and he was the first one down in the hole. He took the lantern Fleming handed down, and lighted the way for Cummings and John Saint John.

"I wondered why you brought that pick-bar," Cummings said with sudden understanding.

Compton took the short iron bar, attacked some rotting timbers which

had appeared to be shoring to hold back the dirt, and easily pried them loose. Then he stepped back to make room for the two big men.

"Ten feet due north," he said quietly. Gospel Cummings and Saint John began to swing their picks. "This didn't need any shoring," the deputy remarked, after a few minutes of toil. "That shelf above us is solid limestone, and it makes a perfect arch."

After an hour, they were under the arch. Ace Fleming and Charley Compton climbed into the hole and began to shovel out the dirt the two men tossed into the hole from the rocky shelf. After two hours of diging, Ace Fleming suggested a short rest.

"After all," he said wearily. "If that old treasure laid there a hundred years, a couple of hours won't make any difference."

"So I'll spell you," Compton suggested; "we ought to be close."

Fleming nodded. He knew that Compton wanted to be the first to make the discovery, if the old treasure was still in its hiding place. As they climbed out of the deep hole, Mona Belle climbed down to join Compton.

"Are you sure it will make no difference, Charley?" she asked anxiously. "If we do find the treasure?"

Charley Compton glanced above, and then stepped under the shelf. He drew Mona Belle after him, and his strong arms went around her.

"Positive," he said, and he kissed her again.

Then he released himself and took the pick-bar. He worked for a few moments, turned his head to listen when the bar struck a rotting timber, and seized the pick. Ten minutes later he went to his knees and made a few quick strokes with the pick. Then he called softly to Mona Belle who joined him under the shelf.

"Look," he said. "The Vallejo treasure!"

Mona Belle reached out a hand and touched a bar of dull metal. "The gold bullion," she whispered.

"There must be a ton of it," Compton said huskily; "let's call old Stingaree!"

The lawyer climbed down into the hole like an eager youngster, followed by Fleming and Cummings. They stared at the dull bars of stained metal, piled neatly like cordwood, with bits of rotting wood and leather here and there.

"They packed this gold up here on mules," Cummings said slowly. "Funny how much difference a dot can make here and there. Now I know why Charley was not worried when he saw that Demingway had started to dig."

MONA BELLE reached well back and picked up a sodden square object. It was a lead box about a foot square, soldered all along the top edges. Stingaree Burke produced a knife and carefully worked on the heavy lid. When at last he lifted the stained metal, a shower of flashes winked back at them from the interior.

"Oh," Mona Belle gasped. "Diamonds and rubies and emeralds. Hundreds of them!"

"A hundred years ago, that was the easiest way to convert money into wealth," Burke explained quietly. "My dear, allow me to congratulate you; you have found the treasure of Rancho Vallejo!"

"Charley found it," Mona Belle said quickly.

Charley Compton was on his knees, reaching into the depths of the hole under the rocky shelf. His face was grimy with dirt, and his shirt was soiled and torn. He stopped for a moment, took a deep breath, and then brought out a smaller box, pitted with age, and from the action of water.

"I hope I am right," he said quietly. "This is worth more than all the gold and jewels." He handed the box to Burke, who cut away the natural lead solder which sealed the receptacle.

There was a deep silence while the old lawyer worked on the leaden box. Only the heavy breathing of the six workers could be heard above the murmuring roar of Lost River. Charley Compton watched intently; he grasped Mona Belle's hand tightly.

Stingaree Burke carefully placed the blade of his knife under the heavy lid. He pried gently, exerted more pressure, and the lid raised slowly. Burke stared at a bit of stained oiled silk in the box. He lifted it gently, passed the box to Saint John, and leaned closer to the lantern. A silken cord broke under his fingers, and the old lawyer carefully unwrapped a folded parchment.

He exposed an ancient document, heavy with brilliant red and gold seals, written entirely in Spanish. He turned to Mona Belle with a smile. "Senorita, please to translate for us," he said politely.

Mona Belle leaned over, still holding tightly to Compton's hand. "It is the land grant, measured in leagues," she whispered. "To Don Alvarado Vallejo, his heirs and their heirs forever. In the year of our Lord 1802. Thank you, Charley," she said earnestly. "Now our people will never have to leave Rancho Vallejo!"

"Just a minute," Saint John interrupted. "Here's a note on an old piece of paper in the bottom of this lead box. I can't make head or tail out of it; written in Spanish!"

"Let me see it," Mona Belle asked quickly.

"It's from Don Alvarado," she said breathlessly, after glancing at the aged note. "Listen to this!" she cried. "It is almost as though Don Alvardo were writing to Charley."

*"Thieves will try to rob me, and find the treasure. I have the feeling that an honest man will at last be successful in the cave of Lost River. To him, I bequeath and bestow half the amount of the gold and jewels on one condition. That he use it wisely to restore Rancho Vallejo."*

There was a silence for a moment, and then the deep resonant voice of Stingaree Burke spoke softly. "Mona Belle, you will marry a wealthy man!"

"And an honest one," Ace Fleming added heartily. "Let's climb up out of this pit!"

STINGAREE BURKE folded the land grant, wrapped it again in the old silk, and replaced it in the small leaden casket. "I will file this document with the land-commissioner," he declared with satisfaction; "I am just thankful that the Syndicate did not find it first!"

He climbed out of the hole, followed by Saint John who carried the heavy box of jewels. Charley Compton helped Mona Belle, and he was like a man just awakening from a deep sleep. He was a legal part-owner of the vast Rancho Vallejo which had always carried the Box V brand.

As his head came above the hole, Mona Belle leaned over and kissed him full on the lips. "Don Carlos Compton," she whispered in his ear. "I am sure Don Alvarado is smiling down on us, God rest his soul!"

"Amen," Compton murmured, and he smiled as Mona Belle helped him climb out of the hole.

"The gold will be safe, but we will take the grant and the jewels with us," Burke suggested. "I won't feel easy until that grant is in safe hands!"

"Stand and deliver!" a rough voice said loudly. "I'll shoot the first man who makes a move for his gun!"

"Dude Fargo!" Stingaree Burke said hoarsely.

"The same, and now head of the Syndicate," Fargo said thickly. "I was hiding all the time on that shelf, letting you shovel-hands do the hard work for me. Just lay that land grant there on the floor. Put the jewels along with it, and step back. I've got two guns on you, and mine are clean!"

Charley Compton listened with his head turned partly to the side. He glanced down at his dirty clothing; stared at the sixshooter riding deep, and jammed in holster leather.

"I'm watching you, Fleming," Fargo said viciously. "Just do what you were thinking about!"

"You can't get us both," Fleming said boldly. "I'm a gambler, Fargo; if you shoot me, Charley Compton will get you before you can ear back for a follow-up!"

Charley Compton straightened suddenly. Ace Fleming was giving him a message, and Fleming was a gambler. Fleming spoke again.

"I always play the cards fate deals me," he told Fargo. "Every smart hombre does the same. You're dealing this hand, and you coppered your bet like a cheap tinhorn!"

"So get brave and make a pass for your irons," Fargo sneered. "I've got *two* guns, remember? I don't have to ear back for a follow-up!"

"Do as he says, Ace," Saint John said hoarsely, and he placed the lead cask of jewels on the ground.

"Yes, please," Mona Belle added her importunities.

STINGAREE BURKE leaned over and placed the land grant near the casket of jewels. Without warning, Ace Fleming threw himself to the ground and to the right. A gun blasted viciously, and orange spurted from the right hand of Dude Fargo.

Charley Compton knew it was coming; he had been trained to read sign from boyhood. His right hand darted down and up with scarcely a pause to separate the two movements. His gun roared thunderously just as Fargo was swinging around to trigger the weapon in his left hand.

Dude Fargo gasped and dropped his smoking guns in the deep pit. He followed them in a headlong dive as his knees buckled. Ace Fleming rolled up from behind a thick limestone pillar, and he limped slightly as he came into the light from the lantern.

"Close," he said with a shrug; "he shot the heel from my left boot!"

Mona Belle turned to Charley Compton. "Are you hurt?" she asked in an anxious whisper.

"I never yet have met a two-gun man who could shoot straight with both hands," Compton stated earnestly. "When he used his right on Ace, I knew I had him."

"Thou shalt not kill," Gospel Cummings said slowly; "perhaps Fargo is alive!"

"You want to bet?" Fleming asked quietly.

Gospel Cummings shook his head with a sigh. "I never bet on the other man's game," he repeated the gambler's statement.

Saint John sighed and lowered himself to the pit. He took the lantern Fleming handed down, made a brief examination, and climbed back out.

"The deceased is dead," he said simply.

"Horses outside," Burke said quickly. "Looks like a string of pack horses to me."

"That will be Tom Brady and Shorty Benson," Fleming said casually. "I figured Charley knew where that treasure was, and I played the hunch. Six pack-horses; that ought to be enough to move the gold ingots."

"The greater value is in the jewels," Burke said quietly to Fleming. "With prices today over what they were a hundred-odd years ago, they might bring half a million."

Charley Compton walked out into the sunshine with Mona Belle. He ejected the spent cartridge from his

gun, reloaded, and seated the balanced weapon in his holster. Mona Belle was Texas stock, born and raised. Don Alvarado Vallejo had fought for the things he thought were right; Charley Compton had done the same.

"I'm proud of you, Charley," she said quietly, and raising up on her toes, she kissed him, and her dark eyes were closed.

## 15

STINGAREE Burke stood in the Circle F yard, staring at the stacked ingots of gold. The old lawyer had changed to a black broadcloth suit, white shirt, walking boots, and neat black Stetson. Gospel Cummings could have passed for the lawyer's twin, if Burke had been ten years younger. Cummings long-tailed coat was green with age, but both men were tall and angular, and seasoned with age.

"It required six stout horses to pack the gold," Burke said thoughtfully. "It must have been taken twice that many burros or mules when Don Alvarado came up the trail with his faithful vaqueros."

"Phoenix is the nearest point where it would be safe to ship the bullion on the railroad," Cummings suggested. "I know a preacher in Phoenix."

The two men appraised each other, and Burke smiled. "The sooner the quicker," he agreed. "It will make me happy to give the bride away. Shall we talk to Mona Belle, or to Charley?"

"Charley is pretty much of a knothead," Gospel said slowly. "If it was me, I'd ruther talk to Mona Belle. I recall the time before Ace Fleming married Sandra; so I talked to Sandra."

"We will have to make up quite a sizeable escort to guard the gold on the pack-trip," Burke continued. "Both Mona Belle and Charley will want to go, and we can spring the wedding on them as a surprise when we reach Phoenix."

"Agreed," Cummings answered just above a whisper. "Quiet now; yonder they come together."

Charley Compton approached the pair with Mona Belle, holding the girl's left hand. Mona Belle was radiant with happiness, and Compton seemed like a different man.

"Mona Belle and I wanted to talk to you old mossy-horns," Compton began confidently. "The gold will have to be packed out to Phoenix, and we are both going along, of course. So we decided that it would be nice for us to get married in Phoenix."

Stingaree Burke and Gospel Cummings stared at each other. Cummings sought refuge from his embarrassment by stroking his long brown beard. Burke felt for the makings, spilled tobacco into a brown paper, and slowly rolled a smoke. "Good idea," he said heartily. "Capital!"

"Likewise," Cummings agreed. "I know a preacher down in Phoenix who will tie the knot so tight it amounts to a life-sentence."

"That's for me," Compton said earnestly, "Mona Belle and I will trot in double harness for the rest of our lives. Gospel, will you be my best man?"

"Glad to," Cummings answered with a happy smile. "And who will be bridesmaid?"

"Sandra Fleming," Mona Belle answered. "Little Deloise will be flower-girl. Charley and I want to thank you both for all you have done for us."

"I will render a fee, my dear," Burke said with mock severity. "After the wedding I will go on ahead to Texas to see that everything is legal and proper. You and Charley can make the trip more leisurely, and enjoy your honeymoon."

CUMMINGS excused himself and walked into the big barn. His hands were trembling as he reached

into the right tail of his coat. He brought out the familiar quart of Three Daisies, made a mark with his thumb, and drank down past the mark. After another one for the road, he replaced the bottle, and the tremble had left his strong brown hands.

"A man never knows when he might get bit by a snake this time of the year," he muttered, and he was leaving the barn when a shadow darkened the doorway.

Cummings glanced up and stared at Swifty Matthews who carried a pair of saddle-bags across his left arm. His right was in a bandanna sling, but Matthews was dressed for the trails. He smiled when he saw Cummings, reached down inside the sling which supported his arm, and handed Cummings a stiff paper.

"Will you throw my hull on my horse, Gospel?" he asked. "And give the paper to Mona Belle for a wedding present. It's the deed to that land I won in a poker-game from Joe Demingway down in Laredo."

"Glad to do it, Swifty," Cummings answered gently, and he did not embarrass the tall Texan with questions. He knew that Matthews wanted to leave at once.

Cummings tucked the deed into a pocket of his coat, saddled and bridled a stout bay horse for Matthews, and shook hands after helping the cowboy to the saddle.

"Good luck, Swifty," he said quietly. "Any plans for the future?"

"I'll like as not to be sheriff of Webb County," Matthews answered in a straightforward manner. "Bear my best regards to the happy couple. It was nice knowing you, Gospel."

Cummings watched him ride away into the setting sun. It reminded him of another lonely ride because of his one besetting sin, when he had left Sandra's mother to a better man.

*"Vaya con Dios,"* Cummings murmured sofly. "Go thou with God!"

Peace had come again to the Strip; the dead had been interred in Hell's Half Acre. A party of eight men would escort the gold to Phoenix; eight men and two women. Sandra Fleming and Mona Belle shared a small tent during the five-day trip; the men slept in their blankets around the campfire.

Ace Fleming knew the Wells Fargo Agent in Phoenix, and after the gold was safely delivered, he took Mona Belle and Sandra to a comfortable hotel. The men put up at another small hotel, and Gospel Cummings went to see his friend about the wedding. Stingaree Burke had wired a wealthy gem-dealer in San Francisco to meet him in Phoenix, and the two were closeted in a locked room for several hours.

Charley Compton reveled in the luxury of a hot tub-bath, and then hurried to a store to buy new clothing. Skid Yancey said he would wear his *"other"* clothes which he carried in his saddlebags.

The wedding was set for the following afternoon, and Compton wandered around like a lost soul.

"I'm glad I only have to get married once," Compton said irritably. "This sotter thing almost kills a man, and the women enjoy every minute of the agony. What time is it, Gospel?"

"Half past one," Cummings answered, after glancing at his heavy silver watch. "The nuptials take place at two o'clock?"

"The which?" Yancey asked with a puzzled frown.

"The wedding," Gospel said quietly.

THE TRAIN trip seemed all too short for the bride and groom. Stingaree Burke was waiting with horses when they arrived at Laredo, and the old lawyer seemed to have shed a decade of years. He explained what he had done as they rode out to the Rancho Vallejo for a homecoming which he assured the happy couple would be their last.

"The Commissioner will issue a deed with the boundaries as marked by the old land grant," he told them. "The jewel dealer in San Francisco

will give four hundred thousand dollars for the gems, but I kept these out for the bride."

He stopped his Box V horse and handed a velvet case to Mona Belle. The bright Texas sun-light reflected back from a collection of unset diamonds, rubies and emeralds, and Mona Belle gasped and feasted on their beauty.

"Thank you, uncle," she said in a low voice. "We will keep them always. They belong to Charley and me, just like everything else on the Rancho Vallejo!"

"Hmm," Burke commented. "So you finally got that settled, eh?"

"Half the treasure belonged to Charley," Mona Belle explained. "And that twenty sections of land with the deep wells. How are all our people, Uncle Burke?"

"Wait until you see them," the old lawyer answered with a smile. "They have decorated the old house, and all the vaqueros will be on hand to greet the Boss and his lovely wife."

They rode into the big ranch-yard just before noon. Charley Compton looked at the little houses of the Mexicans who had been born on the old Rancho. Mona Belle was eagerly studying the big adobe ranch house which had received a new coat of white-wash. The old walls were three feet thick, the roofs were of ancient tile, and strings of red chilis hung from the little cottages.

An old Vaquero rode up on a Box V horse, and doffed his heavy sombrero. He spoke in musical Spanish as he welcomed home the Senora and Senor of Rancho Vallejo. Mona Belle and Compton both answered in Spanish, and went into the big house. A man arose from a cowskin couch; a man with his left arm in a sling, and the badge of a sheriff pinned to his vest.

"Welcome home, amigos," he greeted them. "The name is Swifty Matthews, acting sheriff of Webb County, at your service!"

"Make your report, sheriff," Stingaree Burke prompted with a smile.

"We caught four outlaws holding stolen cattle," Matthews reported. "Four others got away across the Rio Grande, and everything down here is peaceful again."

"Tell them the rest of it," Burke prompted.

"I was arraigned and acquitted on that old charge," Matthews said quietly; "I wish you both the happiness you deserve!"

He shook hands with Compton, kissed Mona Belle on the cheek, and left the big room. Stingaree Burke smiled and put an arm around the shoulders of the happy couple.

"Life is like that," he remarked. "We all left here some months ago; it seems a lifetime to me. Now we are all back where we started, only more so. Rancho Vallejo is in good hands!"

After he had gone, Charley Compton turned to Mona Belle and took her in his arms. "We will build up the ranch the way Don Alvarado intended. I wonder what old Gospel Cummings would say?"

Mona Belle smiled and kissed her husband. "Gospel is one of the finest men I have ever known," she said loyally. "Let's send him a fine new Bible; that old one is about worn out."

"And a case of Three Daisies," Compton added. "Gospel is a man with a dual personality, and we don't want him to get lop-sided!"

"Most Texans are like that," Mona Belle said earnestly. "There is so much good in the worst of us..."

"I know," Compton said tenderly. "We will do the best we can, and perhaps some day Gospel will come back to Texas to live with us. Let us send him a mesage saying: *'Mi casa es de Usted!'*"

As Mona Belle repeated the old Spanish saying in English, it was like a welcome benediction. "My house is yours!"

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# Winning Hand

By Ben Frank

**"Life's a gamble — any way you look at it, son; an' any way you play the game, you may draw a losin' hand. But there's no need for a man to play like a fool . . ."**

THE TRAIL to Benson ran over a hill; and as usual, old Jim Myers pulled his horse to a stop at the crest and gazed down on the scattered buildings squatting in the pleasant green valley. For the moment, his gaunt, tired face softened; he forgot the dragging pain in his right shoulder and arm.

"It's still my town," he muttered. "As long as I live, it'll be my town!"

Years ago, Jim had ridden to Benson—a big-boned young man with a lightning fast right-hand draw and a fair-to-middling left—and had found the town running wild. Someway, it got nosed around that this young redhead believed in law and order and wasn't afraid of the devil himself. The next thing he knew, Jim had been elected sheriff.

Jim Myers was still sheriff; and up until last year, when saloon owner, Beefy Windrow, had brought Al Swanda to town, Benson had been a right decent place. Thinking of Swanda, Jim's face turned hard again, and unconsciously he rubbed his aching right shoulder with his left hand.

Things were working around to a showdown between himself and Swanda; Jim knew it and dreaded it. Scowling, he rode on into town, looking neither to right nor left, but knowing that eyes were fixed upon him. Puzzled eyes, in many cases—people who wondered why Myers was afraid for the first time in his life.

Jim left his horse at the hitchrack in front of the stone jail and went into his office. He let his right hand fall to the butt of the right Colt and drew. The draw was slow and awkward, and the pain in his shoulder and arm made him wince. No two ways about it, straightening that arm in a hurry was bad business.

The pain was the answer to why he hadn't driven Swanda out of town. Scowling, he stepped to the window and stared along the main street of his town. For more than twenty years, he had been keeping a watchful eye on that narrow, dusty street.

Now, seeing Jeanie Todd coming from the post office, he stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine. Jeanie taught the school; she was young and clean, with corn-silk hair and sky-blue eyes.

Waiting for her, he thought of Rusty, his son. Why, he wondered almost angrily, couldn't Rusty have turned out to be the kind of a man whom a nice girl like Jeanie could marry?

Then Jim thought of Windrow and Swanda. Benson was no longer a safe place for a girl like Jeanie. Unconsciously he rubbed at his right shoulder.

"Hello, Pop," the girl said, smiling up at him. "Look," she went on, holding up a letter. "From Rusty. He's coming home; should be here tomorrow." Her blue eyes suddenly clouded. "Pop, sometimes I think I should marry him, anyway. What do you think?"

"You know what I think," he answered shortly.

Head bowed, the girl went on, and Jim stood there, rubbing his shoulder and watching her out of troubled eyes. He knew he was right in advising her not to marry Rusty the way he was. The boy was no good; he was wild and reckless and unstable.

Rusty had been nine when his mother had died. From that time on, Jim had taken over by himself. He'd tried to teach the boy that a man was a fool who would draw to an inside straight—whether in a card game—or in the game of living. Rusty hadn't learned the lesson; recklessness ran hot and wild in him. He wouldn't settle down to a steady job—not even for a girl like Jeanie Todd. The last time Rusty had been home, he and Jim had had it out about the girl.

"Sure, I'm crazy about her," Rusty had said angrily, "but if she won't have me the way I am—well, that's that!"

He'd slapped his big hat over his reddish hair, stalked out of the office, swung into his saddle and had ridden away. Jim hadn't had a word from him since—except through Jeanie. And now the kid was coming back home. Maybe he'd changed; maybe he hadn't. Jim sighed heavily and turned his mind to some reports he had to make out.

WHEN HE left the office, it was close to sundown. The street was quietr and beginning to cool. Hard to believe that Benson was anything more than a peaceful trading-center, lying between the mines on the north and the cattle-country on the south.

Jim went to his lonely old house at the edge of town, cooked up a meal and ate, but he wasn't very hungry. When he went back uptown, the street had come to life; mines and cowboys with money to spend were looking for excitement.

The sheriff met old Doc Lambert, and the medico said, "H'lo, Jim. Looks like a night for a batch of trouble to bust loose."

Jim nodded and started to walk on, but Doc stopped him with, "Jim, when are you going to clamp down on Beefy Windrow's place?"

"No law against a man runnin' a saloon," Jim returned.

"Windrow's place is more'n a saloon," Doc Lambert said, in a flat voice; "it's a cancer in what was a pretty good town."

Jim hurried away. He didn't want to talk to Doc about it; Doc was shrewd and might guess some things. He might remember that old bullet-

wound and put two and two together. He might figure that Jim did have some scheme for taking care of Windrow and his hired gunman. Jim didn't want anybody guessing anything.

He came to McDowell's Feed Store, stopped, and stared across the street at Windrow's place. Men were pouring in and out of the batwings; lights blazed from the slatted windows, and dance-music throbbed on the second floor of the building. Shoulders hunched, Jim crossed over and followed three laughing cowboys into the saloon.

The long, narrow room had an evil smell. Jim shoved up to the bar and ordered his daily glass of beer. Mug in hand, he faced about, surveying the scene with a calmness he did not feel.

Al Swanda, tall, thin, baby-faced, was running a poker-game; but at the moment his white hands were idle, his pale eyes fixed on Jim's face. Jim shifted his gaze and saw Beefy Windrow. Fat arms folded across a huge middle, the man stood near the stairs that led to the rooms above. Windrow was no gunman; that was why he had brought in young Al Swanda. But greedy and rattlesnake mean, the fat man was the brains behind the growing evil in Benson.

A well-dressed stranger stepped up to the bar—a cattle-buyer from the East, Jim guessed. When the man paid for a drink, he pulled a bill from a well-filled pocketbook. Jim wasn't the only one who saw that bulging pocketbook; leaving the poker game, Al Swanda sidled in close to the Easterner. "Let me buy you a drink, stranger," he offered pleasantly.

The cattle-buyer eyed him coldly. "No, thanks."

"Having a little game over there. Want to join us?"

The man shook his head and turned his back on Swanda. The baby-faced young man shrugged and walked back to the table.

Jim finished his beer and returned to the sheriff's office. For a time, he sat in the dark, smoking his pipe and gently massaging his lame shoulder. His thoughts were the black, bitter thoughts of an honest man who has failed to keep a trust.

Along toward midnight, he left the office to make one last round of the street before going home to bed. It was at the corner of McDowell's Feed Store that he discovered the Easterner huddled in the shadows; the man had been beaten and robbed.

DOC LAMBERT finished bandaging the stranger's head; then lifted angry eyes to Jim's gaunt face.

"You know who's to blame for this," he said flatly. "In the old days, you wouldn't let Windrow get away with it."

"Times have changed, Doc," Jim replied, wearily.

"You mean *you've* changed; that old bullet wound in your right shoulder's giving you trouble, ain't it, Jim?"

Jim didn't answer. Face drawn, he went outside and stumbled toward home. That night his sleep was more troubled than usual.

The next morning, he strapped on his twin guns and went out into the warming sunshine. But before going to his office, he saddled his horse and rode into the country on another one of his lonely rides. Coming back, he stopped as usual at the crest of the hill to look down at his town. He had known a lot of happiness in Benson. Here he'd met the girl who had become his wife; here he'd watched Rusty turn from a baby into a gangling boy and then grow to a broad-shouldered young man. But he had known unhappiness, too. His wife's death; his failure to teach Rusty that a man must play life's game with a certain amount of caution and steadiness of purpose.

Eyes straight ahead, he rode along the street, tied his horse to the rail and went into his office. He wasn't paying much attention to anything, so he was startled when a voice said, "Hello, Pop."

Rusty sat in an old armchair with

his long legs stretched halfway across the room. His dark-blue eyes were studying Jim's lined face.

"Where you been, Pop?" he asked.

Jim passed up the question. "How're you, Rusty boy?"

"Fine as silk and chafin' at the bit," Rusty grinned.

He rolled a cigarette and lit it. At twenty-two, he was a good looking kid. "Pop, what's going on in the old town?"

"Nothing much," Jim answered.

"Pop,"— the kid's eyes narrowed— "I've been away quite a spell, but I ain't exactly been out of touch. Jeanie didn't say too much in her letters, but I kinda smelled trouble in 'em."

Unconciously Jim rubbed at his right shoulder. "Been some robberies," he admitted.

"Understand you don't have a deputy now."

"Fred resigned. Got a wife and two kids. Can't blame him—"

"Things about to bust wide open, huh?"

Jim shrugged and fumbled for his pipe.

"Know why I came home, Pop?"

"To see Jeanie, I reckon."

"Partly," Rusty nodded; "but mostly to be your deputy."

For a moment, Jim was tempted; but he shook his head, slowly. "We've been over this deputy business before, boy."

"Sure, I know." Rusty's voice turned bitter. "I ain't a fast man with a gun. You wouldn't have me for your—"

"It's not gunspeed that makes a man a good lawman," Jim cut in; "it's common sense. It's bein' steady and careful."

Rusty's face reddened. "Seems I've heard that before."

"I can't have a deputy who draws to an inside straight," Jim said hollowly.

Their eyes met and clashed, and Jim could feel the hot anger building up between himself and his son. It made him a little sick, but he knew he was right. The boy was no good to him the way he was.

Rusty shoved to his feet. "All right," he said. "I came back to help you, but I see it's no use trying. You're against me every way; always have been. Talked Jeanie out of marrying—"

"I've done it all for your own good."

The boy laughed angrily. "You're an old fool, Pop!" He pulled a thick roll of bills from his pocket and waved it under Jim's nose. "How do you think I got this money? I drew to an inside straight; I bluffed with a pair of treys. I—aw, thunder, what's the use."

Shoving the money into a pocket, he stalked out.

JIM WENT to the window and watched his son swagger to Beefy Windrow's saloon and go in. A great emptiness lay in him. Rusty was still the same wild, reckless kid he'd always been. He was no good; he wouldn't grow up.

Noon came, and Jim headed homeward. He met Rusty coming out of Sam Crane's barber shop, slicked up. The kid had been drinking some, and his eyes were blood shot. But he had forgotten his anger, and grinned boyishly. "Come with me, Pop, and I'll buy your dinner," he offered. "Just won some free meals off that gambler they call Al—"

"Swanda's playing you for a sucker," Jim warned.

Rusty laughed goodnaturedly. "Let's go eat."

Jim shook his head. "You come home with me, boy."

But Rusty shrugged and turned away. Jim went on alone, knowing that it was just as well that the kid hadn't gone with him. Fifteen minutes together, and they'd likely be quarreling.

That afternoon, watching his town through the jail office window, Jim rubbed at his lame shoulder. Dread filled him and deepened the lines of his face. More than ever, he had a feeling

that the showdown between himself and Al Swanda was close at hand.

He was eating his solitary evening meal when Jeanie dropped in. The girl's eyes were red from crying. "Pop," she said, "Rusty asked me again to marry him. He promised he'd settle down and behave. What shall I do, Pop?"

Jim sighed and laid down his fork. "Where's Rusty now?"

"In Windrow's saloon," she answered unhappily.

"There's your answer," he said. Then, seeing that the girl didn't quite get it, added, "Once I owned a bad horse. Made Rusty promise not to ride him. He rode him, anyway. Got an arm busted, but that didn't change him. Another time, caught him playin' poker for pennies with some boys. Said he wouldn't do it again. A week later, caught him in another game—drawin' to inside straights. That's the kind of a boy he was, Jeanie; and he's never got around to growin' up."

AFTER the girl had gone, Jim stood by the kitchen table, rubbing his right shoulder. Then he made a few stabs at drawing with his game arm; it was no good. When he lowered his arm, his fingers stiffened up. All along, he'd known his old speed was gone. Darkness began to crowd into the room, and he gave up his useless practice. Clamping on his hat, he headed uptown.

As was his custom, he went into Windrow's saloon for his daily glass of beer and a look around the place. Rusty sat at a poker-table with Al Swanda, two miners and a young rancher. Ed Burton, the rancher, and Rusty had been boyhood friends.

Jim finished his beer and sauntered over to the table. The stakes were running high, the players tense. "One card," Rusty said hoarsely.

Swanda tossed him a card, and the kid glanced at it and fitted it into his hand. Grinning, he shoved his last pile of chips into the pot.

Smiling thinly, Swanda called his hand. For a moment, Rusty looked stunned. Then, cursing, he flung his cards down and stumbled away. Jim picked up the kid's hand. He'd drawn to an inside straight and missed; his bluff hadn't worked.

After making one last round of the town, Jim went home and crawled into bed. Hours later, he heard Rusty stagger up to his old room. Worried, Jim arose and groped his way to the door of the boy's room. A light trickled through the keyhole. So Jim shoved into the room.

Rusty lay on the bed; he was dead drunk.

Jim took off the kid's boots and put out the light. He stumbled back to his own room and flung himself wearily across the bed. He was still awake when morning came.

He didn't try to arouse Rusty for breakfast. After eating, he made another one of his lonely rides into the country. When he returned to town along toward noon, he sensed immediately that something was wrong. Leaving his mount at the hitchrail, he shuffled into the jail office.

Al Swanda was waiting for him.

"Sheriff," the baby-faced gunman said, "I came to tell you there was a little trouble last night. Ed Burton accused me of dealing from the bottom of the deck. One word led to another, and Ed lost his head. I had to kill him in self-defense."

Jim felt his throat go dry. He started to say something; but Swanda spoke first. "I have witnesses who saw the whole thing, but if you think you should arrest me—"

Leaving the sentence unfinished, the young man stood and let his hands hang loosely at his sides. This was his invitation for a showdown.

Slowly Jim shook his head. "Maybe I'll talk to your witnesses before I make any arrest," he said hollowly.

"You're a sensible man, sheriff."

Smiling, Swanda walked out of the office.

Jim's eyes moved through the window. Men stood in little groups here and there along the street. They knew the score. Face lined, bony shoulders slumped, Jim sat behind his desk, waiting for something, he wasn't quite sure what.

IT WAS late afternoon before Rusty came into the office. Rage darkened his eyes, whitened his face. "So Swanda shot Ed Burton last night after I left," he said. "What are you going to do about it, Pop?"

"Sit down, boy," Jim said. "Take it easy."

Rusty sat down, but he wasn't taking it easy.

"I found out something this mornin', Pop," he said. "Doc Lambert told me about your gun-arm bein' no good, any more. But he ain't the only one who knows it; Swanda knows it. He hinted at it last night, but I was too dumb or too drunk to catch on."

Rusty leaned across the desk. "You goin' to make me your deputy now, or am I goin' to have to murder Swanda—"

"Murder's bad business, boy," Jim said quietly.

"Ed was my friend," Rusty said. "I'm going to kill Swanda!"

Jim sighed and stood, a gaunt, hard-muscled man who suddenly looked twice his age. "Stand up, boy," he said.

Puzzled, Rusty started to his feet. Jim's bony left fist lashed out for the point of the boy's chin. The blow was like the kick of a mule. It sent the kid sprawling.

"Sorry, son," Jim murmured, "but I don't want you to get hurt."

He took Rusty's gun and tossed it into a desk drawer; then helped him to his feet and propelled him into a cell and locked the door.

Rusty shook the haze from his head and stared blankly at the old man.

"Boy," Jim said quietly, "life's a gamble—any way you look at it; an' any way you play the game, you may draw a losin' hand. But there's no need for a man to play like a fool; he don't have to draw to inside straights. He can bide his time, for sooner or later, he'll come up with a hand that he can draw to with a fair chance of winnin'."

"What are you tryin' to tell me?" Rusty gritted.

"Maybe it'd be better if you'd figger it out for yourself," Jim answered.

Rubbing his lame arm, he turned away and strode briskly out into the street. The dread he'd felt all day was gone. Win or lose, he had done his best in the time that had been allotted to him; and now that the time for action had come, he was ready to face the outcome.

He crossed the street to where a knot of men stood in front of the feed store.

"I've decided to arrest Swanda for murder," he told them. "I'd appreciate it if you'd get the word to him. Tell him I'll be watchin' the street for him."

With that, the sheriff turned on his heel and walked back into his office.

RUSTY rattled the barred door of his cell furiously. "Let me outa here," he demanded.

"Take it easy," Jim said. "It won't be long now."

The kid stopped rattling the door. He suddenly understood what was up, and his face whitened. "Pop," he said in a hushed voice, "you can't do it alone; you've got to let me help."

Jim stared at his son. *He's worried for me,* he thought. *For the first time in his life, I reckon, he's run up against somethin' that's scared him. Maybe he's been needin' a good scare all the time.*

Without saying a word Jim went over to the office window. Now the shadows were long in the street, which was ominously deserted. Jim unstrapped his right gun and dropped the heavy belt and holster on the desk. He put on an old denim jacket and buttoned the two lower buttons. Without

thinking much about it, he ran his fingers over the old bullet wound in his right shoulder. Funny how that wound—which he'd gotten years ago in a fight with rustlers—had healed over and hadn't bothered him until the last year or so. Then, all at once, he'd had trouble reaching down and lifting. But, he reckoned, after a man passes his prime, little things begin to give him trouble. Returning to the window, he fastened his eyes on the saloon.

The shadows lengthened. A stray dog trotted along the street, stopped to sniff at an empty tincan. The batwings suddenly swung wide, and Swanda stepped out. His hat was cocked a little to one side. He spit out the stub of a cigar and stepped into the street. Rubbing his lame shoulder, Jim stepped out to meet him.

Swanda halted. "Sheriff," he called, "did you want to see me about something?"

"Yeah," Jim answered. "About murdering Ed Burton."

"Better forget it," Swanda returned tightly.

Jim shook his head. "I'm takin' you, dead or alive."

Hands dangling loosely at his sides, Swanda moved forward. "I'm a hard man to take," he said; "dead, or alive."

And then he noted the absence of Jim's right gun, and his eyes widened a little. He knew all about the lame right shoulder. He remembered the sheriff's lonely morning rides into the country. A trickle of unease ran through him.

*So*, he thought, *the old man has been practicing his left-hand draw. So what? With all the practice in the world, he can't expect to beat a younger man.*

*So the old man has something else figured.* Swanda's eyes whipped to the jail. The redheaded kid! That was it—the redhead was covering the old man. Sweat popped out on the killer's baby-face. He had to get the old man; no time to lose. Get him and then watch those jail windows. And seeing Swanda's fear, Jim Myers smiled to himself.

Swanda fired and knew he'd been in too big a hurry. But the old man hadn't gone for that left gun. "Take your time, Al," he told himself. "Make this shot do it."

A SECOND shot exploded in the tight hush; but it didn't come from Swanda's gun, and it didn't come from a jail window. It came from the gun that Jim had held under his left arm beneath the denim jacket. He had fired it with his right hand, the hand that Swanda had failed to watch. Fired it without lowering, or straightening that crippled right arm.

But Al Swanda never really knew how it happened, because Jim's bullet tore through his heart before he had time to figure it out.

Jim didn't give Swanda's body a second glance. "Somebody might tell Windrow to close up and get out of town," he said, and then walked back into the jail and unlocked Rusty's cell.

The kid stepped out. His face was still white, but there was the beginning of a grin on his face. "Nice shootin', Pop," he said. "How long did it take you to learn to shoot like that from under your left arm?"

"Not very long, once I thought of doin' it that way," Jim answered. "Trouble was, I wasted a lot of time, tryin' to make myself into a lefthanded gunman. Took me three months to realize that tryin' to get myself in shape that way to beat Swanda was like drawin' to an inside straight."

Rusty's eyes wavered. He wasn't scared now, but he was remembering how his heart had stood still when he'd seen Swanda pull his gun and fire at old Jim. He brought his eyes up to the old man's and held them there this time.

"Know anybody around here who's lookin' for a steady cowhand?" he asked.

"Jeanie might know of someone," Jim answered, grinning back at him.

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Special Fact Feature

# el coyote

By Lauran Paine

TO MENTION the Coyote immediately brings the West to mind; no other animal in America so typifies his homeland as does the Coyote. He is not a sneak or a coward; he is prudent, and possessed of a keen sense of humor. He is a great tease and a consummate thief—but he is no coward.

El Coyote is an ancient animal. Supposedly, his name derived from early Spanish—but Castillian Spanish has no such name in its vocabulary. The name "Coyote" is—so far as is known—from Nahautl and quite possibly is a corruption of the name "cocoyoctla". At any rate, and notwithstanding the origin, the name is a very old one and is an "aztequismo".

The Spanish pronunciation of the name sounds something like ki-e-ot-tah, while most Westerners beyond the influence of Spanish pronunciations say ki-ot. Occasionally one hears an old timer say ky-ute, but this is fast disappearing before the more accented ki-ot or ki-ot-ee.

The early Indians had some real jawbreakers to designate Senor Coyote. Skincoots, for example, or meeyahslaychalah—or, if you prefer, sinkelip. Cattlemen call him many things, some tolerantly, some out of minor annoyance; but to cattlemen he is a symbol of the West, more permanent than either the bald eagle or the buffalo, and therefore more of a standard part of their West. But the names sheepmen call El Coyote are neither flattering, or indicative of concrete proof of the marriage of his parents prior to his birth.

The author has an acquaintance who started a sheep ranch with about three-hundred head of sheep. Before the first year was over, he had lost exactly one-hundred and seventy-five head to coyotes alone. Needless to say, the mauraders put the sheepman out of business.

El Coyote is a carrion-eater, which is repulsive to man; but on the coyote's side, he alone of the wild animals who inherited this earth still remains almost as numerous now, despite the guns and cunning of man, as he did one-hundred years ago. He has had to make concessions in order to survive the relentless war against his kind, and eating carrion is one of them.

El Coyote has many unique traits that demonstrate his intelligence, but probably one of his cleverest tricks is

the way he rids himself of fleas and ticks. He will pick at his shaggy coat with his teeth until he has a tuft of hair about the size of a baseball in his teeth; then he will back into a creek very slowly, gradually submerging his entire body until only the tip of his nose remains out of water. The body-lice, fleas, ticks, and what have you, naturally crawl forward as the cold water rises, until they are on the ball of fur in El Coyote's mouth; then the wily little bandit opens his mouth and lets the tuft of hair float away with its frantic and homeless little passengers. Then Mr. Wild Dog will emerge from the water, shake himself lustily, and trot off into the brush.

Coyotes have an almost incredible sense of humor. They play with one another by the hour, darting in and out of the brush, jumping at one another, tumbling, rolling, snapping and cavorting. They dearly love to tease domestic dogs by slipping up close to the house or barn and giving tongue to their peculiar little bark and howl. They will sit in plain sight and yap at a dog, apparently daring him to come up on the skyline and make something out of it. Most dogs know by instinct not to tackle El Coyote.

The author found out the difference between a fighting coyote and a fighting dog about twenty years ago, when he was riding back from a line-camp and saw a mangy old Desert Bohemian slipping in and out of the brush, off to one side. Having a good dog with him—which, incidentally, belonged to the Boss, who was very fond of him—he pointed the dog on the coyote. The dog was reluctant, so the author began to clamber down off the horse with his quirt. The dog surveyed the quirt and the coyote, decided the coyote offered a better chance and tackled him.

El Coyote deliberately led the dog over a ridge and out of sight of the author, then proceeded to turn and give old Tip one helluva going-over. Suspicious of the coyote's tactics, the author loped over the ridge, barely in time to save Tip from a piecemeal grave. The difference in combat between the two battlers was an elementary one, but unknown at that time to the author. A dog fights primarily by getting one good hold with his teeth and hanging on until his adversary is exhausted, dead or definitely beaten; but Senor Coyote uses his teeth to cut and slash and nip, constantly keeping his head and mouth moving like a striking snake. Old Tip was pretty well chewed-up; for several months afterwards he watched the author saddle up with a jaundiced and indignant eye, and never again offered to go along.

MR. COYOTE is impudent and patient, one of the hardest animals in the world to trap, a clever rascal, and a mocking jackal who seems to know just how far a rifle will carry. But he is not a beggar or a coward, nor does he cringe or lose his identity and independence by being dependent on the last observant animal among animals—man.

Coyotes will stay by the side of an injured coyote, and deliberately lure away hunters or riders who happen too close to the lair of the "patient." They help one another in hunting by relaying rabbits and other small game.

That coyotes have a definite system of intercommunication can be ascertained by a casual study of them. They have one particular yelp that is a warning to others of their kind that danger is near. They call for help, and coyly tongue to one another love songs about as dulcet as an old horseshoeing rasp going across your eyeteeth edgeways; but they have no sound for quarter. They live airily and dangerously, with more enemies than almost any other animal; yet, by their wit alone, they still flourish—greyish wraiths devoted to their own kind, their independence and their love of fun and hunting.

El Coyote is a good actor, a cynic

at times, but in all a happy little cuss who is no mean philosopher, with a built-in love for action and adventure; he is a thief on the grand scale, for he will strategically plan a foray into a chicken-yard, calculating the risks, and nearly always bringing off his robbery with feathered success.

One of the hardest creatures to kill without coming to grief, in the animal world, is a porcupine. Old Porky waddles along his merry way, secure against almost any animal except man. Old Leanribs kills Porky and eats him. Not without painful consequences sometimes; but at least the coyote does tackle the porcupine, and often does it so skillfully that his success is crowned by meat, and not quills.

Hunters are often thrown off the trail of coyotes by following the sound of their yelping. This normally evidences the greenhorn, or an ignorant Westerner, for every coyote is a ventriloquist from birth. The cry of a coyote is at once interesting and eerie, and while it carries absolutely no danger to man—unless, of course, rabies are extant—it is nevertheless a sound that makes the hair along the nape of your neck rise up.

El Coyote is supposed to do a half-million dollars worth of damage to stockmen a year, and there has been a lot of loose talk of "exterminating" him. Well, it's a safe bet that the government bureau that figured out El Coyote's depredations in dollars and cents wastes many times over what coyotes destroy annually. So far, no one has figured out a legal way of "exterminating" the bureau, but it can safely be assumed that more Westerners are in favor of the latter "extermination" than the former.

Bounties vary with the country, but in the author's part of the West six dollars is paid for every coyote brought in dead; a few weeks ago a neighboring rancher made ninety-dollars one Sunday out of two dens.

The method was simple and efficient. After locating the dens, the hunter took a smooth stick, wrapped it with barbed wire, inserted this little persuader into the crevice and twisted it around and around until the tiny pups were securely snared; then he drew them out of the hole, slammed their heads against a rock and took them to the county seat where the bounties were duly paid.

In spite of the fact that forest rangers, ranchers, bounty hunters and week-end gunslingers—as well as trappers and poisoners—are hard at it to get El Coyote without any pretense of fair play, the sagacious little clown goes on his way making monkeys out of them all. And so far as some of us are concerned, more power to him!

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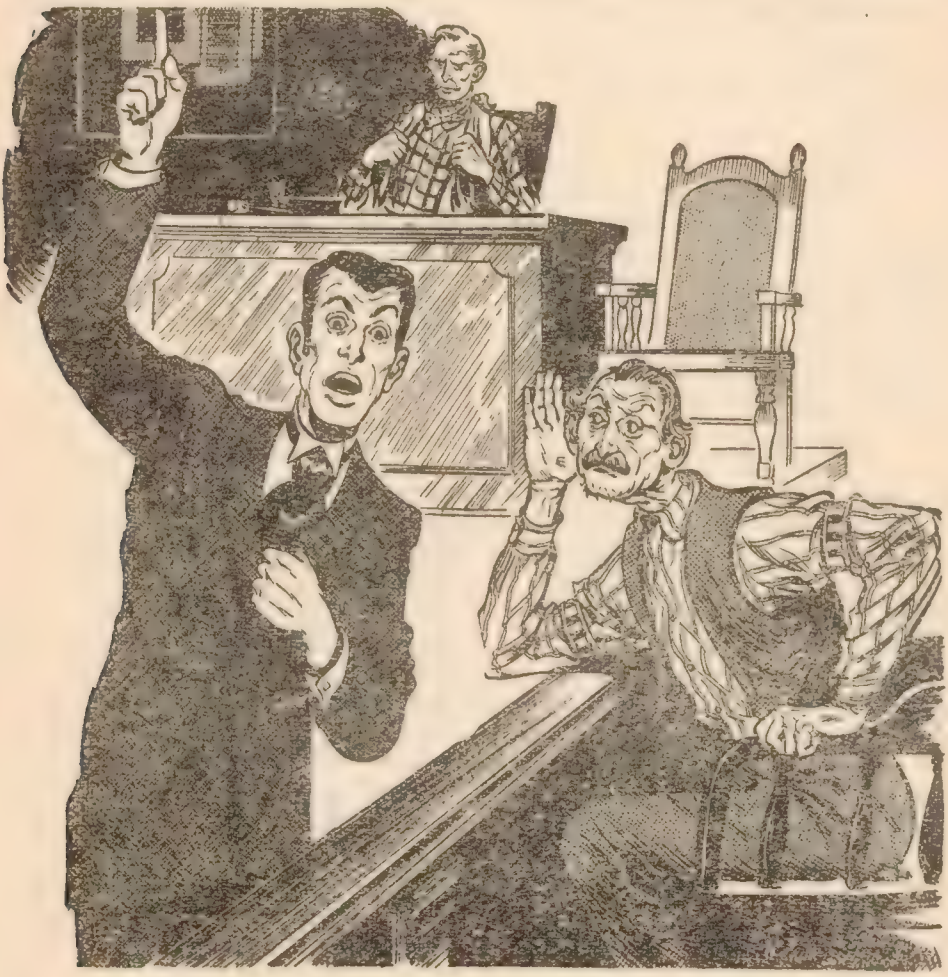
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1952. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1954). (SEAL)

A 'JUDGE STEELE' STORY

# Propter Defectum

## By Lon Williams



Frenchy Demeree was protesting violently. "One of these jurors is *propter defectum* . . ."

★ ★ ★

**What seemed like a plain case of murder was now shaping up as an accident —but Judge Steele figured that this accident was too danged convenient, and too pat . . .**

★ ★ ★

JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE slid heavily onto his split-log bench for another nerve-twisting session of criminal court. In lieu of a gavel, he laid his sixgun before him on a puncheon table that served as a desk. In Flat Creek's log courthouse, an air of expectancy hung tense and ominous. This court of law—regarded by

lawless men at its inception as an attempt to do something that couldn't be done—had repeatedly demonstrated a surprising deadliness. Men who'd considered themselves smart enough to outwit its ignorant, uncouth judge, had wound up with ropes around their necks. But, be-consarned if they didn't keep on coming—brazen varmints who still thought themselves too clever to be outdone.

From habit, Judge Steele cast savage blue eyes over a jammed courtroom. As usual, those remorseless eyes fell upon a mongrel crowd—fierce, bearded golddiggers; sleek gamblers; sneak-thieves; cutthroats; scum of boom-towns, and outcasts of settled society. Despite what had so far been achieved, the fact that Flat Creek citizens gave up their Vigilante committee in favor of a law court signified, in Steele's opinion, a misguided and premature faith in orderly processes. Moreover, their election of him to be their judge, he figured, constituted their supreme act of bad judgement.

But a judge he was and, by thunder, a judge had but one duty with respect to criminals—that of a relentless avenger. Accordingly, he gave his straw-colored mustache a left jerk and a right jerk, leaned over and spat into his sandbox. "Sheriff, call court."

Tall, poker-faced, drawling Sheriff Jerd Buckalew pounded with his .45 on an inverted cracker-barrel. "This court's now in session. Anybody who thinks it ain't, will learn otherwise—to his everlastin' sorrow."

Backing Jerd Buckalew were a dozen granite-hewed deputies, who seconded Bucky's prediction by nods and vigorous hitches at their gunbelts. Standing along front and side walls were other armed men—a score of hard-faced observers who looked on impassively, but in their confident bearing exhibited a cocked-and-primed readiness for trouble.

Judge Steele ordered gruffly, "Clerk, call fust case."

James Skiffington rose like a tall scare crow, his voice as crisp as cracking icicles. "People versus Abner, alias Potleg, Tunstall. Charge, first-degree murder."

Judge Steele looked down at a split-log bench reserved for tough varmints who, wittingly or unwittingly, were living their last small hours. His jaws tensed. What he saw sitting there was as mean-looking a mortal as he'd seen in many a day—a stout, rat-eyed rascal, insolent as a tiger, a smooth upper lip lifted on one side like that of a cur getting ready to pitch into a fight.

Judge Steele's nostrils dilated. "Murder, eh? Somebody ought to told you murder's gone out of fashion hereabouts. Well, better late than never, so we'll be tellin' it to you pronto. You got a lawyer?"

Lean, ill-fed, axe-faced French Demeree in black suit and soiled white vest got up. "I'm his lawyer, your honor. French Demeree. Plea is not guilty."

"Oh, sure," growled Judge Steele. "Demeree from Tennessee. Come West for health and fortune. If you want my opinion, Demeree, your appearance in this court usually spells bad health and misfortune for those conceited, brainless not-guilty scoundrels." He swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky, well-fed redhead got up, proud and confident, though not confident in his cause, apparently. "Wade Claybrook, your honor."

Judge Steele eyed him with a slow-growing dislike. "Sure, Wade. Man-eater Claybrook. From how you go after these blood-smeared criminals, I'd suspect you of living on a diet of raw meat. You should've been raised as a cannibal, considerin' how many murders we have to deal with."

Undaunted by sarcastic criticism, Wade Claybrook spoke his piece. "If your honor please, I'm considering entry of a *nolle prosequi* in this case."

"You're considerin' a nollie what?"

"I fear we have no case against this man, your honor. At first it looked

like murder; but since indictment further information has come to light, by reason of which I'm asking leave to enter—"

"That's enough!" Judge Steele leaned forward, furious. "I was wrong about you, Wade. Instead of being a man-eater, living on raw meat, you're a milk-fed kitten. But don't talk to me about entering anything that means turning this snarling killer loose on society. If he gits out of here alive, he'll know he's been somewhar. Sheriff, 'panel a jury."

BUCKALEW handed a list to Skiffington. Skiffy called one name after another, and twelve men filed forward and seated themselves on jury-benches—rough-faced, sober characters, some of them barbarous enough to eat bones, as well as raw meat, at least half of them Vigies.

"A good jury," Judge Steele muttered. His eyes shifted forward. "Witnesses come and be sworn."

Two from each side came forward and lifted right hands, a short gloom-hound and three long leanies. Skiffington also held up his right hand. "Swear - tell - truth - whole - truth - nothin' - but - truth - selpygod."

When they'd been herded off to a witness-room in back, Judge Steele gave his mustache a jerk with each hand. He'd considered paying Skiffy a compliment on his oratory, but defendant Ab Tunstall's mouth at that instant had swapped sides with its snarl.

"Call fust witness!" Judge Steele snapped.

Claybrook got up. "Elam, alias Little Lamb, Chadburn."

A deputy brought him in, a long-bodied homo with a neck of similar pattern. He was a brown-eyed, friendly sort, whose demeanor suggested he knew much and was ready to tell all; as soon as he was seated on an inverted nail-keg he swallowed and looked up expectantly.

"Look this way," said Claybrook. "You say your name is Elam Chadburn?"

Ye—ye—ye—I—I—I—yu—yu—e-yuh."

"Where do you live?"

"F—f—f—fl—fu—pft—"

Judge Steele leaned forward, face inflamed with anger. "Mr. Prosecutor, do you expect to prove anything by this stammerin', tongue-tied monkey?"

"Your honor, I had expected him to be my best witness. I'm confident he knows plenty; although I confess I've never been able to get from him a coherent story."

"I'm not surprised. Suppose you file him away for future reference and call your next witness."

"Yes, your honor. Call Lillard, alias Lily, Poole."

Witness Chadburn was replaced by witness Poole. He, too, was long and lean, and he gave out an impression of absent-mindedness and cynical indifference to human fortunes and misfortunes.

"Mr. Poole, how old are you?" Claybrook asked.

Judge Steele was already angry; he became more so. "Mr. Prosecutor, this witness is undoubtedly an adult, somewhere between thirty and sixty. He looks reasonably normal, and it's plain he can see and hear. Now, just let him tell what he knows about this murder, and forget about his age and whar he lives."

Claybrook looked peeved. "All right; Mr. Poole, you saw Ernie Grimes get shot, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Tell about it."

Lily Poole shrugged off some of his indifference. "It happened last Friday outside Snip-snip Oliver's barber-shop. I was a-settin' on Pfluger's store porch a-whittlin', when I looks across and through a window I sees this Ernie Grimes combin' his head before a lookin'-glass. He's one of these handsome fellers—dude dresser, curly dark-brown hair, proud as a blister—and he stands there combin' his head and admirin' hisself. Then he ties a handkerchief round his neck, sets his gray hat at a nippy angle, gives his gun-

belt a hitch, and looks at hisself some more. Then—"

"Now, your honor," said Claybrook, "all this is highly irrelevant and time-wasting."

Judge Steele gave his mustache a single sharp jerk. "You're askin' him, Claybrook."

"Did you also see defendant Tunstall?"

"I did," said Poole.

"Where was he?"

"He was there on Pfluger's porch, not a dozen feet from me."

"What was he doing?"

"When I saw him, he was shoving a sixshooter into ts holster."

"You mean *drawing* a sixshooter, don't you?"

DEMEREE sprang up. "I object, your honor, that's a leading question."

"I thought it had a slight draw to it myself," said Judge Steele. "But proceed, Claybrook; just don't ask leading questions."

"What else did you see, Mr. Poole?"

"I saw a man runnin' off, like a scared coyote. They call him Hump Jordan, though I reckon his name's Kelso."

"Yes," said Claybrook. "Why was he running?"

"Object, your honor," said French Demeree. "Witness not permitted to draw conclusions."

"Question withdrawn, your honor," said Claybrook. He studied a moment, his eyes resting vacantly on Lily Poole. "What else did you see?"

"Well, now, there is this Ernie Grimes over there in Snip-snip's place, admirin' hisself before a lookin'-glass. So far as I know, he's a stranger in town, same as this Tunstall and—"

"Objection," shouted Demeree. "Witness should stick to what he knows, not to what he doesn't know."

"Go on and tell what you know, Mr. Poole," urged Claybrook.

"—and Hump Jordan," Poole finished. "Now, about this Ernie Grimes. He's still straight across there in Snip-snip's place, admirin' his handsome self. After so long a time, he's satisfied nobody could be any handsomer; so he lays his shoulders back, fixes his arms at his sides, his elbows out sharply, which gives him a picture-frame look. He's just about ready to leave when he decides to take one more glimpse at his handsome self. This time he knows he's perfect, with not a pimp nor whisker, so out he comes. He's about two steps out of Snip-snip's place, when a thunderclap lets itself loose within ten feet of me. In that same instant, Ernie Grimes grabs his shirtfront with both hands, staggers a second, then falls on his face. That's when I look around, and there's this Tunstall shovin' a smokin' sixshooter into its leather. There's Hump Jordan, too, pickin' hisself up where he's tumbled off Pfluger's porch, and he sure don't waste no time around there, once he gets up."

"What else did you see?"

"There's been riders lopin' by, which keeps me busy spittin' dust. Somewhere around close a drunk man is singin' a sad song, and over in Cooksy Blair's saloon somebody's knockin' fire out of a piano. That pretty gal, what's new in Cooksy's place, starts singin', too, and—"

"That will be all," said Claybrook. "Cross-examine."

LAWYER DEMEREE got up, a pleased expression on his sharp face. "Mr. Poole, you mentioned Hump Jordan as being there on Pfluger's porch. Had you heard Jordan and Mr. Tunstall, defendant here, in any kind of conversation?"

"They'd been jowerin' a right smart."

"Isn't it true that Hump Jordan had thrown a knife at Tunstall, two knives, in fact?"

"Wouldn't be surprised; they was two knives stickin' in Pfluger's wall about that time."

"And isn't it true that Hump Jordan had a third knife in his hand and was advancing upon Mr. Tunstall in a threatening manner?"

"Sounded like it. I was interested in this handsome Ernie Grimes and not payin' much attention to Tunstall and Hump Jordan; but I heard Jordan say—"

"Object," said Claybrook. "He can't tell what somebody said."

"Of course I can," said witness Poole. "I remember every word of it."

Judge Steele looked down at Poole. "Sure, Lily, but you'll have to get it out of your system by goin' round Robin Hood's barn; it'd be hearsay if you told it straight out."

"Well, what he done was tell Tunstall he'd cut his dang black heart out."

"Fine," said Judge Steele. "Now you've told it, and nobody's hurt."

"No more questions," said Demeree.

"Prosecution rests, your honor," said Claybrook.

"Call Kelso, alias Hump, Jordan," said Demeree. "Witness for defendant."

Lily Poole was displaced by Hump Jordan, slim, surly, and slightly humped. If there was any expression, other than surliness, on his thin mug, it was one of cold contempt for everything around him. It riled Judge Steele, just to look at him.

Demeree began with calm assurance. "Your name is Kelso Jordan?"

"Yes."

"Are you acquainted with defendant, Mr. Tunstall?"

"Yes."

"Were you on Pfluger's store porch with him last Friday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Had he followed you there?"

Claybrook popped up. "Object; question is leading."

"Were you on Pfluger's porch ahead of Mr. Tunstall?"

"Yes; he followed me there."

"Did you have a quarrel with him?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

"He'd made unkind remarks about my personal appearance."

"You and he had previously quarreled, then?"

"Yes."

"Did he resume his unkind remarks?"

"Yes."

"And you became angry?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I threw a knife at him."

"What did you do next?"

"I gave a repeat performance."

"Then what did you do?"

"I drew a third knife and made as if to kill him."

"What did he do?"

"He whipped up a gun and clipped a fancy shot at me."

"But missed you?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I cleared out."

Demeree cast a taunting glance at Claybrook. "Cross-examine."

Claybrook shook his head resignedly. "No questions."

JUDGE STEELE drew a hand angrily across his forehead; his nostrils dilated fiercely. "Claybrook, what do you mean, no questions? Can't you see this witness is a lyin', sneakin', stinkin' polecat? Why don't you tear him limb from limb? You ought to pull him down off of thar and stomp his insides out. Any more witnesses, Demeree?"

"Your honor, I have one more, but his testimony would only be corroborative of what has come from Lily Poole and Hump Jordan. He will swear that he saw Hump Jordan throw two knives at Mr. Tunstall, then advance upon him with a third knife; that Mr. Tunstall was backed against a wall in dire peril of being killed; and that he drew his gun and fired to save his own life."

Claybrook got up. "It isn't neces-

sary to call him, your honor. I think we have a clear picture of what happened."

Demeree assumed a pious attitude. "Mr. Claybrook is to be commended for his exemplary fairness and high sense of justice, your honor. It is clear enough—as Mr. Claybrook inferred—that Mr. Tunstall shot in self-defense and that his missing his assailant, and that killing Grimes instead was purely accidental. Accordingly, I move that your honor direct a verdict of acquittal."

Judge Steele was so mad his vision was momentarily blurred. "And now," he growled, "I suppose Me-too Claybrook will want to second that motion."

Claybrook got up promptly. "Your honor, I do not resist his motion. In a case of this kind—of which there are precedents in our law—there was no crime in killing Grimes, if there would have been none in killing Hump Jordan. It is certain that if Tunstall had killed Hump, he would have been guilty of no crime, for self-defense is clearly indicated. As I said, I do not resist Mr. Demeree's motion."

"I didn't expect you to, by thunder," snarled Judge Steele.

Demeree had remained standing. "I wish again to commend Mr. Claybrook for his high-minded character and unimpeachable sense of justice and right. Also, I renew my motion for a directed verdict of acquittal."

Judge Steele heaved himself up, driven to ferocity by desperation. "Well, blow me; you can move till your face is blue, but you'll git no directed verdict of acquittal. And you'd better save them flowers you've been tossin' at Claybrook and put 'em on your client's grave.

"Thar's something about this case that stinks worse'n a dead horse. Beconsarned if everything don't fit everything else like works in a watch. This snarlin' dog Potleg Tunstall misses a man within five feet of him, but hits another man dead center clear across Flat Creek's widest street; this skin-and-bone buffalo called Hump Jordan throws two knives at Potleg Tunstall and misses him at five feet. Yet you forked-tongue lawyers talk about self-defense and accidents, when you ought to know this whole thing was a put-up job to kill Ernie Grimes. Well, Potleg ain't out of here yet and, by thunder—"

Judge Steele's roving, remorseless eyes had made contact with a big six-footer on a distant puncheon. His angry thoughts subsided. "Bill Hacker, get yourself up here, before I start a massacre."

Bill Hacker rose. "Coming, Judge." He was broadshouldered, with dark, boring eyes, black, short-cut mustache, and a pair of sixguns. He held brief conference with half a dozen bearded confidants and came forward with long, determined strides.

Judge Steele sat down as Hacker slid up beside him. "Bill, these lawyers have got me so mad I can't see straight. What in tarnation can I do? I wasn't cut out for no judge nohow, and you know it. I won't ever forgive you for wishin' this job off on me."

"You're a fine judge, Wardlow; couldn't be any better," said Hacker. "You just be patient now, and we'll get a pry-pole under something pretty soon. One of my men just whispered to me a little something back there. According to him, Tunstall, Hump Jordan and Little Lamb Chadburn used to have a traveling show; he forgets where he saw them, but he's pretty sure he's right. So I suggest you have this skunk called Hump Jordan take a seat back there, while you work on Little Lamb for a spell."

"Bill, I knowed it; this whole set-up smelled bad from fust off. But how can we git anything out of that stammerin' polecat?"

"Little Lamb's undoubtedly faking; probably was part of his act in their show. Anyhow, try scaring his daylights out."

Judge Steele straightened. "You,

thar, Hump Jordan, take a seat down thar and stay with it; I figure you'll be wanted again soon. Sheriff, have Little Lamb Chadburn brought back in here."

SHERIFF BUCKALEW gave a nod, and Elam Chadburn was ushered in. Hump Jordan, looking puzzled and uneasy for a change, found an aisle-side puncheon seat and sat down.

Elam Chadburn appeared less willing to talk than formerly.

Judge Steele glared at him. "Is your name Elam Chadburn?"

"Ye—ye—ye—yi—yi—"

"Answer my question, consarn you!"

"Yes."

"Well, why didn't you say so? How would you like to have a rope put around your neck?"

Little Lamb paled and hand-swiped his fluffed-up sandy hair. "I—yi—yi—wouldn't like it."

"You've made a study of that stammerin' business, hain't you? By thunder, you'd have to study, to be such a artist. Ever been in show business?"

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

"Yes, sir, I have."

"You're a friend to that mad-dog down thar they call Potleg Tunstall, ain't you?"

"No, sir, no friend; but I know 'im."

"Been in show business with 'im?"

A shrill clearing of throat cut in, and Judge Steele glared at Hump Jordan, whose face had assumed a murderous look. One of Bill Hacker's men, a black-bearded giant, was moving forward.

Little Lamb Chadburn hesitated, swallowed, and looked from Hump to Tunstall. Potleg, too, had assumed a slaughterous expression. Little Lamb stammered, "Ye—ye—yi—"

"You answer my question, you scrawny stinker," growled Judge Steele. "That dog-faced murderer thar by Demeree ain't goin' to hurt nobody from now on; that goes for Buffalo-hump too."

"I was in show business with both of 'em," said Little Lamb.

"How about Ernie Grimes?"

"Well, he—"

"Out with it, and don't be so consarned slow."

"Well, Ernie was in our show, too; and there was a girl named Abby Gurney. She was a pretty thing; could sing too. Fact is, she's got a job now at Cooksy Blair's saloon, where she sings regular. She was—"

Demeree eased up. "Now, your honor, I'm going to object. This examination is highly irregular. Prosecution had rested, and you can't—"

Judge Steele's face tightened. "Demeree, you set down thar and stay set. Prosecution has rested, all right; but now it's spit on its hands and started fightin' again. You just consider yourself a interested spectator from now on." He swung toward witness Chadburn. "Now, Little Lamb, you go right ahead, and if you tell one single solitary lie, I guarantee you'll get your neck stretched."

"Well, I was going to say, our show busted up. It was because this Ernie Grimes stole our girl Abby Gurney. When Potleg found where she was, and where he'd likely find Ernie Grimes, he says he's going to follow 'em. Hump says he'll go, too, and they'll work it out together."

DEMEREE started to get up, but when a couple of deputies moved toward him, he eased back down.

"Now, a most important question," said Judge Steele. "This Hump Jordan, he'd most likely be world-champion knife thrower, wouldn't he?"

"Claimed to be, yes, sir; it was part of his act. Abby Gurney would put on tights and stand against a wide board, and Hump'd fence her in with knives at twenty feet."

"And this dog called Tunstall was pretty fancy with a sixgun, eh?"

"Claimed to be world-champion fancy shooter—though Ernie Grimes was better. This Abby Gurney could hold a burning match between her

teeth, and Tunstall would shoot its flame off at forty, fifty, sixty feet."

"Now, since you're talkin' about experts, Hump Jordan wouldn't be likely to miss a man with a knife at five or six feet, would he?"

"He could split a button at twenty feet."

"And this sheep-killin' Potleg Tunstall wouldn't likely miss a man at five or six feet with a sixgun, would he?"

"No."

Judge Steele turned to Hacker. "Now, Bill, what else?"

Hacker nodded forward. "Take a look, Wardlow."

Hump Jordan was on his feet, a long knife in hand. But Giant Blackbeard had him locked in a bear-hug.

Bill Hacker slid down. "Hold everything, Wardlow; I'll be right back." Blackbeard and two helpers carried Hump out and were followed by Hacker and about fifteen others. In three or four minutes Hacker was back. "They're hanging Hump Jordan on our old beech behind Cooksy Blair's saloon, Wardlow. I figure we're ready now for a verdict."

Judge Steele swung left. Twelve jurors got up at his nod and filed out. When they'd been out long enough to stretch and take a couple of deep breaths, they filed back in.

One of their number, a solemn-faced golddigger, remained standing. "Guilty, Judge. First degree murder."

French Demeree was on his feet. "Your honor, I move for a new trial."

"You don't say! Well, what in tarnation for?"

"Your honor, one of those jurors is *propter defectum,* whereas every accused is entitled to trial by a jury of twelve."

"What does he mean, Bill?"

Hacker drawled his answer. "He means one of our jurors has a physical defect, on account of which he is not qualified as a juror. He has in mind Brant Burlew, who's deaf as a post. Brant is *propter defectum,* all right, but Demeree should've objected by way of examination on *voir dire.* If it had been a case of *propter affectum*—if he could show that a juror was prejudiced one way or another before the trial started—its discovery would have been ground for a new trial; but being only *propter defectum,* it's deemed waived."

"Bill Hacker, you shut up." Judge Steele looked at Sheriff Buckalew. "That murderin' skunk's your man, Bucky; hang him." He glared at French Demeree. "For good and sufficient reasons, Axe-face, your motion is overruled."

●

When everybody except Judge Steele and Bill Hacker had gone out to see Potleg Tunstall strung up, Judge Steele got up and holstered his sixgun.

"I know less every day about being a judge. I'm so ignorant, I don't know whether I'm goin' or comin'. You ought to been judge, Bill; you're educated. You'd know how to put them consarned lawyers in their proper places—if they've got any proper places other than stretchin' hangropes."

Hacker thoughtfully filled his pipe with tobacco crumbs and struck a match. "You're doing a fine job, Wardlow. A skunk now and then will get away—thanks to lawyers—but they won't *all* get away. I imagine that what happens here is right discouraging to a lot of criminally-inclined humans, too—more so than if we followed Vigilante methods, which criminals could copy. You just keep hammering away, and any time you need a touch of moral support, I'll be around."

Wardlow Steele drew his sixgun, absently twirled it once around his finger and reholstered it. "All right, Bill. It's like turnin' a sausage-grinder—but, by thunder, so long as murderers furnish us meat, just so long we'll keep a-grindin'."

# Sixgun Comeback

## By E. E. CLEMENT

★ ★ ★

**"The Tucson Kid was a bad one, but he wasn't a coward; he'd give any man a square shake and take his chances!"**

★ ★ ★

OUTSIDE, the wind howled like all the banshees of the old world. Sand and gravel rattled from the clapboard side of the old saloon like sheet iron in a hailstorm. The old building rocked, shook, sighed and groaned, as if ready to give up the fight and settle down to the floor of the desert out of which it stood, like a sore thumb on an artist's hand.

It was still day, and it should have been light, but the swirling sands of the desert blotted out the sun and made it so dark that a flickering lamp standing on the bar was needed to light the interior of the saloon.

Around the pot-bellied stove, three old men sat huddled dejectedly, cursing fervently as occasional gusts swept down the battered pipe, causing clouds of smoke to billow out into their bearded faces.

Through the single, dingy window one could see the flying tumbleweeds come whizzing into view out of the darkness from the west and go whirling on out of sight to the east. Faintly, from somewhere out in the storm, sounded the doleful bray of a burro. It must have been close to have been heard at all above the mighty roar of the wind. Suddenly, the door crashed open and an old man staggered inside. The lamp was instantly blown out and papers lying near the stove went flying about the room as the three men leaped forward to help close the door. The feeble stranger tottered over to the stove and with a sigh of thankfulness, sank wearily into a chair near the warm fire.

"It's shore hell to be caught out in a storm like this," he smiled apologetically as he looked across at the three men.

"It shore is," one replied.

The stranger thrust his feet closer to the hot stove. He was thinly clad in faded and ragged garments. His shoes were broken and worn and he presented a pitiful appearance as he sat huddled gratefully in the big chair, listlessly combing his long white beard between the bony fingers of his thin, blue-veined hand.

The other three old fellows watched him silently, pityingly. Suddenly, with a sympathetic oath, the bartender arose and brought the aged derelict a stiff drink of whiskey. "Throw that into ye, pard," he muttered kindly. "I feel fer a feller what has to be out in a time like this."

"Thanks," the feeble wreck whispered as he glanced around at his companions; then he began coughing violently and as he leaned back in his chair exhausted, a thin trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. He hastily wiped it away with the sleeve of his ragged coat and smiled weakly. "I ain't as stout as I used to be," he apologized timidly.

"Hyar, pard, damn it, you come with me. I got a bed back hyar. You come lay down a while. You're sick," the bartender growled with rough sympathy.

"No," the stranger whispered between gasps, "just let me sit here. I like to hear you all talk. I'll be stronger after a bit. I'm just tuckered out from walkin' against this wind."

"Suit yerself, but remember, ye got a bed waitin' fer ye whenever ye want to lay down," the bartender told him kindly.

At that moment a telephone tinkled faintly and the bartender turned away to answer it.

"What?" his companions heard him yell into the instrument. "The Tucson Kid? Can't be. Huh? The hell 'e did. The sheriff's hyar now. Uh-huh. I said yes. Yes. Hyar, Sheriff," he called excitedly. "Grab this phone. The Tucson Kid's gone on the rampage again."

"Hello," the old sheriff bawled into the transmitter. "Huh? Louder, durn it, I can't hear ye fer the blasted wind. The Tucson Kid? I don't believe it. Yes. Yes. All right, I'll rustle a posse right away. Uh-huh. All right." He slammed the receiver back on the hook and turned to face his companions, a look of amazement on his bearded face.

"What in blazes do ye make o' that?" the bartender whooped.

"They say that the Tucson Kid just robbed the bank at Thatcher. Killed the cashier an' a woman stenographer an' is beatin' it in this directon. I'm to get a posse an' try to head 'im off."

"It ain't the Tucson Kid," the bartender replied with conviction. "Whoever that hombre is, he's an imposter usin' the Kid's name for effect. The real Tucson Kid never shot no women an' never would. The old Kid was a brave man an' brave men don't shoot women."

"I don't believe it's the real Kid, either," the sheriff growled. "Why, durn it, the Kid ain't been heard tell of fer nigh onto forty years. This hombre is just usin' the Kid's name fer effect. I shore hate to have to go after 'im in this awful weather."

OUTSIDE, the storm roared with a fresh outburst of fury. Somewhere, a loose piece of tin slammed and clattered in the wind and bottles back of the bar rocked to and fro from the vibration of the walls.

"An awful day," one of the men remarked. "Reminds me of the time we trailed the Tucson Kid for that last raid he made over on the Brazos."

"It shore does, Floyd," another remarked. "It's been nigh onto forty years ago, but I'll never forget the time we had. You was sheriff then an' I was foreman of the old Bar CC outfit. You deputized me an' Guy here to go with ye an' we trailed the Kid plumb to the edge o' the Desert an lost 'im."

"Yep," the bartender remarked. "He disappeared completely on us an' we had to give it up an' turn back. The sand storm just wiped out his tracks as fast as he made 'em."

"It shore did, Guy," the old sheriff replied, "an it was just exactly such a day as this. I reckon the real Kid is dead an' gone by this time, but he was shore a wildcat while he lasted."

"He was the most dangerous man I ever saw," old Guy Crosby, the aged bartender, replied. "The Tucson Kid was shore one fightin' fool an' the fastest jasper with a gun that ever hit the southwest. If the old Kid was hyar now, he'd make this imitation Kid hard to catch."

"He was a holy terror in a scrap," another, old Floyd Arnold, grinned reminiscently. "I remember the night he gave me this." Old Floyd held up his right hand and showed his companions a long white scar clear across the back near the knuckles. "Shot my gun square out o' my hand an' backed out o' the Ten Gallon Saloon over at Laguna with the whole durned crowd shootin' at 'im."

"Yep," Guy grunted, "but I reckon he had his good points too. I recollect the time he robbed the Madison bank. Sheriff Ridley trailed 'im clear to the Brazos an' sighted 'im just as the Kid swum 'is horse out on the opposite bank. The old Brazos was shore on a rampage an' bank full o' water an' the Kid could have made 'is getaway easy enough, but he soused spurs to 'is horse an' come racin' back at a dead run when he saw the sherriff's horse washed down an' drowned; then, without a second's pause, he plunged into that boilin' flood an' saved Ridley's life at the risk of his own. He wasn't all bad an' he shore had nerve—that Kid."

"Nerve? I reckon he did have nerve," the sheriff laughed knowingly. "Take the time he held up the Continent Express, single-handed, an' got away clean with over eighty thousand dollars."

"That hombre has snagged enough money in his time to have been rich. I reckon he must have gone away somewhere an' settled down, for he dropped out all of a sudden," another remarked.

"Yeah," the bartender yawned, "unless he's dead by this time, he's probably sittin' around somewheres takin' life easy on the dinero he's got cached away."

A smile struggled on the sick man's face and he began laughing weakly, but the effort was too much for him and the laugh ended in a paroxysm of coughing which left him trembling and gasping for breath.

"I—I," he panted helplessly, "I—maybe I'd better lay down on that bed a little while—if you don't mind."

"Shore," the big bartender replied, heaving his huge bulk upright with a jerk. "Come on, pard," he growled, putting his brawny arm around the sufferer, "let me help you."

He helped the feeble derelict into a little room at the back of the saloon; then pulled off the broken shoes and

tucked the feeble sufferer in bed.

"Boys," he called, "some o' you fellers heat my coat there at the stove so I can wrap up this poor devil's feet—they're damn nigh froze. I'll git 'im some more whiskey."

AT LAST, with the warm coat around his feet and a stimulating drink, they made him confortable.

"Call me, pard, if they's anything ye want," the big-hearted bartender told him as he closed the door softly and went back into the saloon.

"Well," the sheriff grumbled, "I've got to raise a posse an' start after that blamed hombre what calls hisself the Tucson Kid. Darn sheriffin' in such blasted weather, anyhow."

He examined his pistol carefully; then slammed it back into its holster and with an oath of disgust, arose and stamped toward the door, but just as he reached the knob, the door crashed open in his face and they beheld a masked man crouched menacingly in the opening, his long-barreled guns pointed unwaveringly toward the occupants of the little barroom.

"Stick 'em up, hombres," the newcomer barked, jabbing a big pistol against the sheriff's stomach and backing him toward the stove. "No tricks," he warned, "or I'll make buzzard meat out o' the whole outfit. Put them hands up an' keep 'em up. I'm the Tucson Kid an' I eat 'em raw."

The dumbfounded men obeyed reluctantly; then the outlaw kicked the door shut behind him and walked to the middle of the room. His evil eyes glittered dangerously through the holes in his mask as he glared toward old Guy who stood behind the bar with his big hands raised above his head.

"Come around here, you," the bandit snarled. "Line up over here with these two other old codgers. Damn me, if you three old goats are worth the powder an' lead it'd take to kill you. What's that star on the front o' your coat?" he barked savagely as his eyes caught the glitter of the sheriff's badge. "Well, I'll swear," he roared insultingly, "I've caught me a blamed sheriff, this trip."

The old officer's face reddened with shame and a reckless light glittered in his faded blue eyes. Better, he thought, to die fighting than to be branded as a coward. Suddenly, his gnarled hand swooped downward toward his gun butt. It was a lightning draw, but he hadn't a chance. The ruffian's gun roared and the sheriff's half-drawn Colt clattered to the floor as a blistering slug of lead pierced his arm.

At that instant, old Guy and Floyd went into action and the storm's roar was drowned by the crash of barking guns. Stifling the agonizing pain from his wound, the sheriff grabbed up his fallen Colt in his other hand and leaped behind the stove, his old six-shooter rattling like a machine gun. A heavy bullet knocked down the battered stove pipe and smoke and soot boiled out into the room. Crash! The big mirror behind the bar flew in fragments. Guy's pistol was shot from his hand. Floyd staggered back with a broken arm. Bullet after bullet smacked against the iron casing of the stove ricocheting wildly. Floyd slumped against the bar, pale and weak. The outlaw bounded like a panther and caught him in his powerful grasp; then with the old man's body as a shield, he advanced upon the sheriff.

"Shoot, boys," Floyd yelled as he struggled feebly to break loose. "Don't mind me; I'm already hit. Keep shootin'."

Guy leaped forward, the hammer of his triggerless Colt, which he had recovered, thumbed back and ready. Crash! The gun dropped from his fingers as he crumpled to the floor. With a roar of rage, the outlaw again advanced toward the sheriff who stood powerless to shoot for fear of hitting old Floyd.

"Shoot," Floyd yelled, fighting furiously to release himself.

"Drop that gun," the desperado barked savagely. "Drop it or I'll kill this hombre right before yer damned eyes. Drop that gun or I'll shoot," he roared, jamming his gun against Floyd's stomach.

"I'll give up, you damned coyote," the sheriff grated, dropping his pistol to the floor.

"Step out here with yer hands up," the ruffian ordered. "Put 'em up higher. That's better. Where's yer handcuffs? I never saw a blamed sheriff who wasn't packin' a pair or two."

He ran his hand into the sheriff's pocket and drew out a shining pair; then twisting the sheriff's hands behind him, the ruffian snapped them on him.

JUST AS he finished, old Guy gave a hollow groan and began struggling to get up. The outlaw's bullet had just grazed his skull.

"Not dead yet, are ye?" the bandit growled, advancing with ready gun.

"Well, I'll just put you out o' your misery, right now." He raised the heavy Colt and jammed it against the bartender's chest, but suddenly, with a fiendish laugh, he lowered the hammer and stepped back. "No," he chuckled brutally, "I've got a better way o' dealin' with such old goats as you. I'll just tie up the whole bunch an' set fire to the place. I'll learn ye to pull a gun on the Tucson Kid."

The big bartender was struggling dazedly to his feet when the ruffian kicked him backward and tied his hands securely behind his back. This done, he found a piece of rope behind the bar and running it through their arms, tied all three securely to the bar rail. Next, he grabbed up the lamp and poured the oil all over his captives and upon the floor around their feet.

"Now," he gloated with a bloodthirsty chuckle, "I'll let you three old goats learn how it feels to be cooked alive. Men who try buckin' the Kid always git what's comin' to 'em."

"You dirty coward," came a weak voice behind him.

"What?" the bandit roared, whirling with ready guns.

"You're a dirty, cheap, four-flushin' coward," the old derelict replied, tottering feebly into the room.

"Why, you—" the bandit lowered his guns and burst out laughing as the old man staggered and had to hold onto the wall for support.

"Callin' yourself the Tucson Kid," the sick man sneered with cold contempt. "Why, you're a disgrace to the name, you cheap alley cat."

"What?" the ruffian snarled. "For that, I'm goin' to shoot you to death a little at a time."

Savagely, he raised his heavy pistol. Crash! Blood trickled from the sick man's ear, but the feeble derelict seemed scarcely to notice it. In spite of his weakness, he showed not a tremor of fear—not even the flicker of an eyelash—and as the gun muzzle came up again, his steel gray eyes blazed defiantly.

"And they say that the Kid had nerve," he sneered.

Bang! Blood streamed from his other ear. "Why you poor miserable excuse of a badman!" Bang! A heavy bullet grazed his scalp. "You haven't even got the nerve to let me pick up a gun and fight you." Crash! another ball nicked his ear. "Me—a wreck like me—an' you haven't got the guts to face me with a gun in my hand. Ha, ha," he burst into a fit of laughter that started him coughing again.

"Damn you," the ruffian choked, lowering his gun. "Why, damn you, do you think I'd be afraid of a thing like you? Why, you—you—" He broke into a tirade of profane abuse.

"Prove to me an' these other men, that you're not afraid," the old derelict taunted him. "I'm callin' your hand, you cheap four-flusher. Let me buckle on one o' them guns an' then face me."

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## WESTERN ACTION

"Do you know what it means to face the Tucson Kid?" the outlaw roared, hoping to browbeat the old man.

"Do you?" the derelict replied coldly.

"What?" the ruffian blustered.

"Don't fight 'im, pard," called the bartender who had just recovered consciousness. "Don't, you ain't able."

"Pick up one o' them gunbelts an' git ready," the outlaw yelled.

Smiling, the invalid stooped and picked up the sheriff's discarded gunbelt and buckled it around his thin waist; then he thrust a loaded Colt into the carved holster. The effort started him coughing again and he had to lean against the wall until it stopped.

"You cowardly hound," the bartender roared. "Turn me loose an' let me fight you. Give me a gun, damn you. If you hurt that poor sick devil, I'll get loose from hyar an' tear you to pieces." The infuriated man almost tore the bar rail from its fastenings in his efforts to break loose.

"Git ready," roared the bandit, slamming his own gun into its holster. "I'll show you who's afraid."

"Don't," the sheriff begged. "That'd be nothin' but a cold-blooded murder. Don't try to fight 'im, pard."

"Gimme a Colt an' face me, you dirty coward," Guy raged. "You white-livered hound. You woman killer. You rat." Lunging furiously, he tried to break his bonds.

"I'll fix you—later," the desperado snarled savagely. "For that talk, I'm goin' to watch you burn."

THE SICK man was flexing and working his fingers as though to limber them for the coming gunplay.

"Sheriff," he smiled weakly, glancing toward the officer. "A while ago, I heard you say that you were startin' to raise a posse to go after this skunk. Now that you're all helpless, I'll be that posse."

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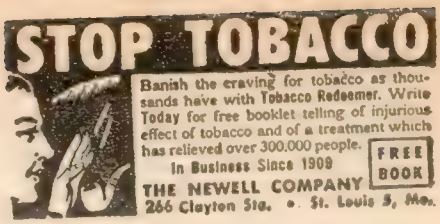


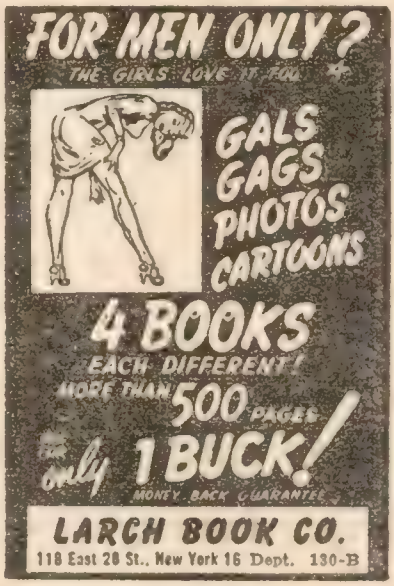


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## WESTERN ACTION

"Git ready," the outlaw roared.

"I'm ready," the derelict replied quietly. "Let the sheriff count three; then go for your gun."

"Start countin'," said the bully.

"I won't do it," the sheriff protested.

"Then, you, my friend," the old wreck nodded toward the bartender.

"Never," Guy shouted; "but I'll fight 'im myself—bare-handed, if he'll turn me loose."

"Maybe this man will count for us," the sick man remarked quietly, turning to old Floyd.

"No," old Floyd blazed, "I won't count, but I'll fight 'im."

"Well," he smiled at the outlaw, "if no one will count for us, you'll have to do it yourself. Start countin' an' at three, go for your gun. I'll be ready for you."

"Stop" Guy roared, struggling to break loose, "it's a cold-blooded murder."

"One!"

Instantly, the sick man began rubbing his fingers in his hair. It was an old gunfighter's trick to limber them for the fray.

"Two!" barked the outlaw.

"You damn murderer," Guy yelled. One end of the bar rail was ripped from its fastenings with his mighty struggles and the bar went over with a crash as he lunged forward with a roar.

"Three!" There were two ear-splitting reports—so fast that they blended as one shot. The derelict's Colt had leaped from its holster like a flash of light. His draw was the flip and throw of the professional gunfighter. He scored two bull's-eyes before the outlaw's gun cleared the leather and the desperado crashed to the floor, his heart split by bullets.

"Sheriff, there is your outlaw," the derelict smiled as he stooped to release the prisoners. As he finished another fit of coughing struck him and he staggered over and sat down by the stove.

"Good Lord," the astounded barten-

der finally gasped. "Why, pard you've downed 'im. He stood looking first at the dead outlaw; then at the coughing sufferer as though unable to believe his senses. "Well, I'll be tectotally dod-gasted," he muttered.

Suddenly, he whirled and lumbering around behind the wrecked bar he grabbed up a bottle of his best whiskey, his remedy for all diseases. "Hyar, pard," he growled, handing it to the sick man, "drink this. It'll help yer cough. Drink the whole damn bottle an' remember, they's plenty more where that come from. Gosh, but I'll bet you was forked lightnin' with a six-gun in yore younger days."

"Hey!" yelled the sheriff who had just pulled the mask from the dead bandit's face, "this ain't the Kid. Why this hombre ain't over thirty years old, an' the real Kid would have been as old as we are—or older."

"I didn't think it was the Kid," the bartender grunted. "The real Kid was a man. The Kid, we knew, drifted away from this range a long time ago, an' I'll bet he had just hunted him out a nice quiet spot an' ended 'is days in peace an' plenty on the jack he made. 'Tain't many that has the sense to quit like that. I reckon I missed 'im clean when I shot at 'im that day over on the Colorado."

"He might have been a lot better off if your shot had've killed 'im then and there," the sick man remarked as he began unbuttoning his coat.

"Oh, I don't know," the bartender remarked. "The Kid wasn't a bad feller at heart. I'm kinda glad I missed."

"You didn't miss 'im, the derelict smiled as he threw open the front of his tattered shirt, exposing a ghastly scar on his emaciated chest "I have carried that bullet for forty years."


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## THE TRADING POST

*(continued from page 8)*

meek fellow. Unfortunately, Johnson himself had had one drink too many. He comes into the room where Arkansas is seated and begins, "I reckon the Pennsylvania election..."

Arkansas raises his finger impressively and the landlord stops. Arkansas rises unsteadily and confronts Johnson. "What—what do you know about Pennsylvania? Answer me that. Wha-what do you know 'bout Pennysylvania?"

Johnson is a bit frightened. "I was only goin' to say..."

"You was only goin' to say. You was! You was only goin' to say—what was you goin' to say?"

"Mr. Arkansas, if you'd only let me..."

"Who's a-hinderin' you? Don't you insinuate nothing agin' me; if fight's what you want, I'm your man!"

This scares the wits out of Johnson who starts to back into a corner, with Arkansas following him, menacingly. "Why, I never said nothing, Mr. Arkansas. You don't give a man no chance. I was only goin' to say that Pennsylvania was goin' to have an election next week; that's all. That was everything I was going to say. I wish I may never stir if it wasn't."

And then the frightened landlord does a bit of quick thinking. What about a drink? It ought to help the situation. "Come now, Mr. Arkansas, let's take a drink. Let's shake hands and take a drink. Come up—everybody! It's my treat. Come up Bill, Tom, Bob, Scotty—come up. I want you all to take a drink with me and Arkansas. Old Arkansas. Thar stands the whitest man in America.

They drink. Arkansas, bribed by the drink, has permitted his prey to escape for the time being. As for Johnson, he should have beat it out and gone for help from the sheriff. The bully begins to brood. He has been

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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cheated out of his prey! His ears pick up something that Johnson has just said.

"Lan'lord, will you p-please make that remark again."

Johnson almost swallows his Adam's Apple: "I was a-sayin' to Scotty that my father was up'ards of eighty years old when he died."

"Was that all you said?"

"Yes, that was all."

"Didn't say nothing but that?"

"No-nothing.

There is an uncomfortable silence in the room. Arkansas starts. "Lan'lord, what's your idea for rakin' up old personalities and blowin' about your father? Ain't this company agreeable to you? Ain't it? If this company ain't agreeable to you, p'r'aps we better leave. Is that your idea?"

Johnson begins to feel the sweat going down the back of his neck. "Arkansas, I reely didn't mean no harm, and I won't go on with it if it's onpleasant to you. I reckon my licker's got into my head, and..."

At this point our bully feels he can smash his man. "Are you a-threatenin' me. By George, the man don't live that can skeer me." And finishing those words, his hands go near the butts of his two revolvers.

Johnson is half-dead with fright and from his lips escape words he should never utter, "Please, Arkansas, please don't shoot! If there's got to be bloodshed..."

That's all Arkansas has to hear. He turns to the rest of the scared spectators. "Do you hear that, gentlemen? Do you hear him talk about bloodshed? So it's blood—blood—you want. I'm the man, am I? It's me you're going to murder. Draw your weapon!"

Out come those two guns; Arkansas begins to shoot at the landlord, and the poor frightened man starts for the door.

And then comes the situation in the person of Mrs. Johnson. Suddenly she appears in the doorway with a pair of scissors in her hands and confronts Arkansas. There is fury in her eyes. A good man is hard to get in the West; she wants her man alive. She raises her scissors in defense—Arkansas hesitates, and is lost.

He moves back a step; she follows him. He goes back—back, step by step. Never wavering for a moment, those scissors are pointed for an apparent deadly thrust. The spectators watch all this. The bully has backed down—has been given a lesson. And by whom? By a female.

Mrs. Johnson is no fool; she knows she is master of the situation. "You big-talkin' man," she tongue lashes him, "you have to learn to behave yourself before it's too late. Now get out; and don't come back until you learn how to behave yourself."

It's all over, Arkansas had been made ridiculous and he is finished. From now on he takes the insults—not gives them.

I regret to state that no monument was erected to commemorate the taming of the bully by Mrs. Johnson. But she got what she wanted—her husband in one piece.

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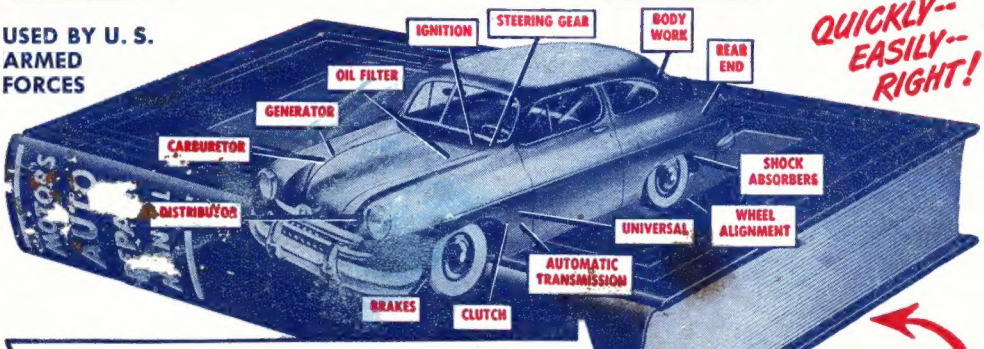


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